

Invited Testimony for a Hearing in Michigan on Common Core
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I thank State Representative Tim Kelly, chair, and other members of the Subcommittee on Common Core for the invitation to speak about Common Core's standards. In my testimony, I indicate why Common Core's English language arts standards are not rigorous enough to prepare students for a high school diploma, never mind college-credit coursework, and why they lack international benchmarking, research support, and credible authors. I will conclude by suggesting what Michigan legislators might do to strengthen an ailing public school system after they defund the implementation of a set of standards and assessments based on them that are lowering the academic level of public education. My testimony today builds on the testimony I gave on March 20, 2013 (<http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/Michigan-testimony.pdf>).

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.

Content of my testimony:

- 1. Common Core's standards are not rigorous and do not make students ready for a high school diploma, never mind authentic college coursework.**
- 2. Why Common Core's standards lack a research base, international benchmarking, and credible authors.**
- 3. Recommendations**

1. Common Core's standards are not rigorous and do not make students ready for a high school diploma, never mind authentic college coursework.

a. Most of Common Core's college-readiness and grade-level reading standards are content-free skills. Skills training alone doesn't prepare students for college. They need a fund of content knowledge. But Common Core's ELA standards (and its literacy standards for other subjects) do not specify the literary/historical knowledge that students need. They provide no list of recommended authors or works, just examples of "complexity." They 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 not prepared for college coursework.

b. Common Core expects English teachers to spend over 50 percent 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; that is where the 50/50 mandate comes from. 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—by college English departments and teacher preparation programs—to teach the four major genres of literature (poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction) and the elements of rhetoric, not a large body of information about the English language.

c. Common Core reduces opportunities for students to develop critical thinking. Critical, or analytical, thinking is developed in the English class when teachers teach students how to read between the lines of complex literary works. Analytical 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.)" As noted in a 2006 ACT report titled "Reading Between the Lines:" "complexity is laden with literary features." According to ACT, it involves "literary devices," "tone," "ambiguity," "elaborate" structure, "intricate language," and unclear intentions. Critical thinking applied to low-complexity texts, ACT concluded, is inferior to critical thinking applied to high-complexity texts. By reducing literary study in the English class in order to increase informational reading, Common Core not only reduces the opportunity for students to learn how to do critical thinking, Common Core, in effect, retards college readiness.

d. 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 every grade level in Common Core. 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 in every subject of the curriculum.

e. 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. Nor does the document clarify the difference between an academic argument (explanatory writing) and opinion-based writing or persuasive writing, confusing teachers and students alike. Worse yet, Common Core's writing standards stress emotion-laden, opinion-based writing in the elementary grades. This kind of writing is not helpful to the development of critical or analytical thinking, and it establishes a very bad habit in very young children. There is no research evidence to support this kind of pedagogy.

2. Why Common Core's standards lack a research base, international benchmarking, and credible authors.

Common Core's Validation Committee was supposed to ensure that its standards were supported by a body of research evidence and internationally benchmarked. Some of us regularly asked for the names of the countries the standards were supposedly benchmarked with, but we didn't

get them. Nor did we get citations to the supposed body of evidence supporting the idea that an increase in instruction in informational reading in English classes will make students college-ready.

So far as I could determine, the Validation Committee was intended to function as a rubber stamp despite the charge to the Validation Committee to validate the standards. We did not get evidence on international benchmarking because Common Core did not seek any. All it claims is that it “consulted” or was “informed by” the documents of other countries. It did not offer any research evidence to support its stress on writing over reading, its arbitrary division of reading instruction, or its claim about the value of informational reading instruction in the English classes because there is none. Nor did Common Core 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.

The deficiencies in Common Core’s ELA standards can be traced to the people in charge of writing the standards. Neither David Coleman nor Susan Pimentel was qualified to write K-12 ELA standards and determine the college readiness level. Neither has ever taught in K-12 or in higher education; neither has ever written about ELA curriculum and instruction; neither has any reputation in the field of reading or literary study. No one knows officially why they were chosen to write the ELA standards. Nor do we know why most of the members of other committees were selected. I was the only expert on K-12 ELA standards on the Validation Committee by virtue of my work in Massachusetts. The Standards Development Committee contained no literary scholars or high school English teachers. Most members of both committees were associated with testing companies, policy-making organizations, or education schools.

Summary

Let me repeat some basic facts first. (1) Common Core’s standards are NOT rigorous. They were designed to allow low-performing grade 11 students to enroll in credit-bearing courses in a non-selective college. (2) Common Core’s standards are NOT internationally benchmarked and will not make any of our students competitive. (3) There is NO research to support Common Core’s stress on writing instead of reading. (4) There is NO research to support Common Core’s stress on informational reading instead of literary study in the English class. (5) There is no research to support the value of “cold” reading of historical documents. (6) Available research suggests exactly the opposite of what Common Core’s chief architect promotes in the ELA classroom.

3. Recommendations

1. Michigan should eliminate appropriations to its department of education to implement the Common Core.
2. Michigan should withdraw from Smarter Balance (SBAC) and base its state assessments in reading and literature on its previous standards, not on Common Core’s inferior English language arts standards. It would be a waste of the taxpayers’ money to base state assessments on a set of standards that needs to be completely revised, if not abandoned. It could also adopt or revise a set of ELA and mathematics standards from states whose standards were considered internationally benchmarked and first-class (e.g., California, Indiana, and Massachusetts). The Bay State’s released test items are freely available on its website.
3. Michigan should distinguish high school tests for a high school diploma from matriculation tests for admission to its colleges and universities. Not all high school students want to go to college or can do the reading and writing required in authentic college coursework. Many have

other talents and interests and should be provided with the opportunity to choose a meaningful four-year high school curriculum that is not college-oriented.

4. Michigan legislators should ask literary and humanities scholars at their own universities to work with a group of experienced and well-trained high school English teachers to design and approve a matriculation test in reading and literature for admission to Michigan's own colleges and universities. They should also ask engineering, science, and mathematics faculty at Michigan's own colleges/universities to design and approve a matriculation test in mathematics and science for admission to its own higher education institutions, as well as the syllabi for the advanced mathematics and science courses this faculty wants to see Michigan high school students take. Michigan does not need federal education policy-makers, test developers, or its own department of education staff to decide what the admission requirements to its colleges and universities should be in reading, literature, mathematics, or science.

5. Michigan legislators should require all state standards to 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. The future costs for staying with Common Core will far outweigh the costs for leaving while leaving is still possible.