

**Invited Testimony for a Hearing on the
Implementation of Common Core's Standards in Arkansas
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I thank State Senator Johnny Key, State Representative James McLean, and other members of the Senate and House Interim Education Committees for the invitation to comment on the implementation of the Common Core standards in Arkansas. In my testimony I explain why Common Core's English language arts and mathematics standards need to be revised before further implementation by Arkansas or any other Common Core state. I also suggest what Arkansas could do to strengthen college readiness and increase student learning in all subjects while it remains a Common Core state.

My professional background: I was professor of education reform and holder of the 21st Century Chair in Teacher Quality at the University of Arkansas from 2007 until I retired in December 2012. I served on the state-wide committee in 2011 that helped to develop the Arkansas Comprehensive State Literacy Plan for Birth to 12th Grade. I also served on Common Core's Validation Committee in 2009-2010 and organized a series of public forums on Common Core's standards in Arkansas during the year. At a 2009 conference on state policy, I outlined the kind of information that state legislators could ask the department of education to make available so that Arkansas could determine whether the academic quality of its teaching force is increasing over time. (http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/Indices_of_TQ_for_AR_20090508.pdf)

The points I will speak briefly to:

1. Why Common Core's English language arts and mathematics standards need revision before further implementation by Arkansas or any other Common Core state.
2. What Arkansas could do to strengthen college readiness while awaiting a revision of Common Core's standards.
3. What Arkansas could do on its own to increase student learning in all subjects, especially civic education.

1. Why Common Core's English language arts and mathematics standards need revision before further implementation in Arkansas or elsewhere.

First, Common Core's ELA standards have many flaws:

Common Core expects English teachers to spend at least 50 percent of their reading instructional time on informational texts at every grade level. It provides 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level. (An informational text is a piece of writing intending to convey information about something, e.g., gravity, bicycles, nutrition.) However, there is no body of information that English teachers have ever been responsible for teaching, unlike science teachers, for example, who are charged with teaching information about science. As a result, English teachers are not trained to give informational reading instruction—by college English departments or by teacher preparation programs. They typically study four major genres of literature—poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction—and are trained to teach those genres.

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. It is facilitated by the knowledge that students acquire in other ways and in other subjects because critical thinking cannot take place in an intellectual vacuum. By reducing literary study in the English class, Common Core reduces the opportunity for students to learn how to do critical thinking.

Common Core's middle school writing standards are developmentally inappropriate for average middle school students. Adults have a much better idea of what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are. Most children have a limited understanding of these concepts and find it difficult to compose an argument with claims and evidence. This would be the case 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 persuasive writing, confusing teachers and students alike.

Most of Common Core's college-readiness and grade-level standards in ELA are empty skills. Skills training alone doesn't prepare students for college. They need a fund of content knowledge. But Common Core's ELA standards (as well as its literacy standards for other subjects) do not specify the literary/historical knowledge 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.

Common Cores' Mathematics Standards also have serious flaws.

Common Core does not complete the teaching and use of the standard algorithms of arithmetic until grades 5-6.

Common Core defers the study of many Algebra I concepts to grade 9. This makes it difficult for mathematically able students to complete an authentic Algebra I course in grade 8. As the 2013 NAEP results indicate, over 30% of 13-year olds nation-wide take Algebra I, a percentage that has been increasing regularly since 1970.

As Stanford University Mathematics Professor R. James Milgram testified before an Indiana House Education Committee, “Our students will be more than two years behind international expectations by grade 8. The top countries start algebra in grade 7 and geometry in grade 8 or 9. By the end of grade 9, their students will have learned all of the material in a standard geometry course, all the material in a standard Algebra I course, and some of the most important material in a standard Algebra II course. This allows a huge percentage of them to finish calculus before graduating from high school.”

While at first it is surprising that Common Core’s non-rigorous standards received a grade of B+ from the Fordham Institute in its 2010 review, one needs to know that Fordham received about one million dollars from the Gates Foundation to promote them and also used a different evaluation and grading scheme from the one it had used in earlier reviews of state standards. Thus, one should be skeptical about Fordham’s claim that Common Core’s ELA standards are superior to *most* states’ standards. Arkansas *would* benefit from better standards for K-8 than it had, but Common Core’s ELA standards have different but more serious problems than Arkansas’s previous standards and must be revised before Arkansas can benefit from them.

What should revision address? Common Core’s standards need international benchmarking, credible authors, and removal of the arbitrary percentage for literary study in K-12. Its Validation Committee (VC) was supposed to ensure that its standards were internationally benchmarked. Even though Professor Milgram (the one mathematician on the VC) and I (and possibly others) regularly asked for names of the countries to which the standards were supposedly benchmarked, we didn’t get them. Indeed, Common Core’s chief mathematics standards writer made it clear that its aim is not to increase the number of students for the freshman mathematics courses that science, engineering, and nursing majors should take. He told the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education at a public meeting in March 2010 that Common Core’s vision of college readiness means readiness for admission to a non-selective college. Arkansas is already beyond that with its Smart Core Curriculum requirements.

Moreover, neither of Common Core’s chief standards writers (David Coleman and Jasonimba) has ever taught in K-12, nor published anything on curriculum and instruction. They are basically unknown in the field of education. For credibility, Common Core’s standards must be revised by high school English and mathematics teachers, literary scholars, and science, engineering, or mathematics instructors of freshman mathematics—groups that were excluded from the development of Common Core’s standards. This would ensure that states that adopted Common

Core to increase achievement in low-performing students are not at the same time inadvertently reducing the academic challenge needed by other students.

As it proceeds to implement Common Core's standards, Arkansas should keep in mind: (1) These standards are NOT internationally benchmarked. (2) They are NOT rigorous. (3) NO research supports Common Core's stress on "informational" reading instruction in the English class or its approach to geometry in secondary schools. (4) Arkansas does not need Common Core to find out how its students compare with those in Alabama. It can already use NAEP state results to do so. (5) The inter-state mobility rate in K-12 is estimated at less than 2% of the school population.

2. What Arkansas could do to strengthen college readiness while awaiting a revision of Common Core's standards.

Arkansas wisely conditioned eligibility for its Academic Challenge Scholarship on successful completion of the Smart Core Curriculum, which helps to ensure students take the high school mathematics coursework needed by aspiring engineering, science, and nursing majors. Its Informed Consent and Waiver forms make it clear that Smart Core is the foundation for college-and-career readiness. This policy ought to be emulated by other Common Core states. But Arkansas needs to take one more step: Use the state's own higher education faculty in science, engineering, and mathematics to develop its own rigorous end-of-course tests for Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II (and for lab courses in the sciences as well) as the way to guarantee their integrity.

Arkansas's contract with Common Core does not and should not require Arkansas to use Common Core-recommended standards for its own end-of-course tests, as well as the courses in these three mathematics subjects. Appendix A of the mathematics standards document, showing what Common Core suggests for the content of these three courses, was added after the final document was released on June 2, 2010 *and* after the Board of Education voted in late June 2010 to adopt it. If states substitute Common Core-recommended standards (in the name of "alignment") for the standards recommended for these courses by their own higher education faculty, they will be dumbing down these courses and end-of-course tests based on them, leaving Arkansas students inadequately prepared for the freshman mathematics courses now expected of science, engineering, and nursing majors.

At present, states have no way to judge the extent to which the consortia-developed tests are lowering the level of the high school mathematics curriculum. Since all college entrance tests are also being very quickly aligned to Common Core's notion of college readiness, they, too, will not be able to provide independent information on the extent to which Common Core is reducing high-performing students' participation in more demanding mathematics curricula and their academic eligibility for STEM majors and internationally competitive jobs in mathematics-dependent areas.

Arkansas might also consider offering two different types of high school diplomas to make sure that mathematically ambitious students are not only encouraged but rewarded for their efforts. Several states already do.

3. What Arkansas can do to increase learning in all subjects, especially civic education.

Many people think that the “Massachusetts Miracle” was due solely to the K-12 standards I helped to develop. These standards may have been more effective than those in other states but, in my judgment, that was only because of other changes I made—in academic requirements for teacher and administrator training programs, licensure tests, and professional development. *High quality in K-12 standards is not enough.* Raising the academic bar for admission to an education school (something I could not do) and embedding the content of strong academic standards into educator preparation programs, licensure tests, and professional development (something I did do) will over time lead to increases in achievement for all students in reading and mathematics, as it did in Massachusetts.

That is why I have recommended at other legislative hearings in Arkansas (1) adoption of the Foundations of Reading licensure test I helped to develop in Massachusetts for all teachers of young children (<http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/Arkansas-Testimony-2013.pdf>), and (2) changes in the K-12 curriculum, teacher training, licensure tests, and professional development to improve the quality of civic education in its schools. (http://69.195.124.65/~uaedrefo/site-der/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/Microsoft-Word-Good_Citizenship_op-ed_in_AR_Dem_Gazette.pdf)

Concluding Remarks

All state standards should be reviewed and revised if needed at least every five to seven years by teachers, discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences, and parents in a state. In addition,

all state assessments should be reviewed by teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences in a state before the tests are given. This can't happen with Common Core's standards and assessments. Arkansas has lost control of the content of its children's education under Common Core. Its main task is simply to pay for its costs. The future costs for staying with Common Core will far outweigh the costs for opting out, and the costs for staying in are not just financial.