

**Invited Testimony for a Hearing on
House Bill #616 and Senate Bill #210:
Bills to prohibit the State Board of Education from adopting and implementing Common
Core's Standards and Tests**

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I thank State Representative Paul Curtman and State Senator David Pearce for the opportunity to support bills prohibiting the State Board of Education from adopting and implementing the standards for public schools developed by the Common Core Standards Initiative—as part of a larger effort to downsize government. I will explain why Common Core's English language arts standards and future tests are worse than those Missouri has used in recent years, why Common Core's ELA standards will lower student achievement and reduce the quality of your teaching force, and why they cannot be changed unilaterally by Missouri no matter what you 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. That Common Core's English language arts standards won't lead to college readiness**
- 2. That they lack a research base, international benchmarking, and qualified authors**
- 3. What leads to college readiness in the secondary English class**
- 4. That Missouri cannot change one single word in Common Core's standards**
- 5. What Missouri can do to increase student learning in all subjects**

1. Common Core's English language arts standards won't lead to college readiness:

Common Core's "college readiness" standards for ELA standards have many flaws:

Common Core expects English teachers to spend over 50 percent of their reading instructional time on informational texts at every grade level. It sets forth 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level, K-12. (An informational text is a piece of writing written to convey information about something, e.g., gravity, bicycles, nutrition.) 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. In addition, English teachers are not trained to give informational reading instruction—by college English departments or by teacher preparation programs. They study four major genres of literature—poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction—and are trained to teach those genres.

Common Core reduces literary study—what English teachers are trained to teach. Common Core does not specify the literary/historical knowledge students need in its standards. It offers no specific 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. It does not require study of the history of the English language.

Common Core's middle school writing standards are an intellectual impossibility for average middle school students. Adults have a much better idea of what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are. But most children have a limited understanding of these concepts, even if Common Core's writing standards were linked to appropriate reading standards and prose models. Nor does the document clarify the difference between an academic argument (explanatory writing) and persuasive writing, confusing teachers and students alike.

Common Core's college-readiness standards are chiefly empty skills. Skills training (such as how to use Google or a card catalogue or find a main idea) alone doesn't prepare students for college. High school students need to be taught how to read and understand the content of complex literary texts in order to do "critical thinking."

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 a research base, international benchmarking, 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 did we get citations to the supposed body of 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," despite all the parrot talk. In grades 6-12, it is about "rigor for none" or educational *rigor mortis*. Its goal is not to increase all students' achievement—the goal of the Bay State student standards and tests, and teacher standards and tests. Common Core's goal is to close the demographic gaps in student achievement the easiest way that Gates and the USDE could figure out—which is why Jason Zimba, the mathematics standards writer told the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Education at a public meeting in March 2010 that college-readiness for Common Core means readiness for admission to a non-selective community college. The aim of its high school mathematics standards is not to strengthen the high school curriculum and to prepare a regularly increasing number of students for college freshman calculus courses.

Reading researchers have acknowledged there is no research to support Common Core's claim about the value of informational reading instruction in the English or other classes. It is also the case that the organizations that developed these standards (CCSSO and NGA) and that promoted them (NASBE, PTA, Achieve, Inc.), as well as recent reports on the "validity" of Common Core's standards by one scholar at the University of Oregon and another one at Michigan State University, have all been funded by the Gates Foundation. None offers evidence that Common Core's standards meet current entrance requirements for most colleges and universities in this country or elsewhere. Moreover, the Gates Foundation chose the chief writers of Common Core's standards in English language arts and mathematics. Neither has ever taught in K-12.

3. What leads to college readiness in secondary English classes? The study of complex literature in the English class, not informational texts, leads to college readiness. Students have to be taught how to "read between the lines." Literary study was the focus of the Massachusetts 1997 and 2001 ELA standards, considered the "gold standard" among state ELA standards long before Massachusetts students scored in first place in grades 4 and 8 in reading on NAEP—and stayed 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. From the 1960s onward, the decline in readiness for college reading (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.

By reducing literary study, 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.

4. Why Missouri cannot change one single word in Common Core’s standards: The two organizations that developed Common Core’s standards have copyrighted their documents. States that have adopted Common Core’s standards cannot change one word of the standards in them, even if their teachers find the standards confusing, placed at inappropriate levels, or poorly written. States can add up to 15% of their own standards but must assess this 15% themselves. This 15% is above and beyond what is in the Common Core standards.

5. Why Missouri’s own ELA Standards didn’t increase student learning enough: The fact that the Bay State’s standards seem to have been more effective than those in other states can be attributed to the 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 its 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.

Final Comment

Let me repeat some basic points of fact first. (1) Common Core's standards are NOT internationally benchmarked and will not make us competitive. No country has ever been mentioned as a benchmark. (2) Common Core's standards are NOT rigorous. The Gates Foundation wanted to make a sale. Would any state have adopted them if it wasn't told they were rigorous? (3) There is NO research or research evidence to support Common Core's stress on "informational" reading instruction in the English class or in any other high school subject. (4) Missouri does not need Common Core to find out how Missouri students compare with Idaho students. It can use NAEP's results to find out.

All state standards need to be reviewed and revised if needed at least every five to seven years by identified Missouri teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences, and parents. In addition, all state assessments should be reviewed by Missouri 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. Missouri 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 leaving while leaving is still possible.