

## **Invited Testimony for a Hearing on Common Core in Indiana**

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**August 5, 2013**

**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 all the state's K-12 standards. 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. I served as a reviewer and advisor to Indiana on its 2006 ELA Academic Standards and 2008 ELA Core Standards. Finally, I served on Common Core's Validation Committee from 2009-2010.

**Content of my testimony:** I will speak briefly to the following points.

- 1. How Indiana's former ELA standards compare with Common Core's**
- 2. What the differences mean for the classroom and for assessments**
- 3. Why Common Core does not make students ready for authentic college coursework**
- 4. Why Common Core's ELA standards are not internationally benchmarked or research-based**
- 5. Recommendations**

### **1. How Indiana's former ELA standards compare with Common Core's.**

The Fordham Institute review in July 2010 nailed down the differences quite succinctly.

Indiana's standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards. Essential content is grouped more logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands. Indiana also frequently uses standard-specific examples to clarify expectations. Furthermore, Indiana's standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail throughout the document, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. Both Indiana and Common Core include reading lists with exemplar texts, but Indiana's is much more comprehensive.

### **2. What the differences mean for the classroom and for assessments**

*a. More writing than reading in every Common Core classroom because Common Core's ELA standards stress writing more than reading at every grade level.* Just count the writing and the reading standards in Common Core. This is the reverse of what a century of research indicates as the basis for the development of reading and writing skills. The foundation for good writing is good reading. Not all good readers become good writers, but all good writers have been good readers. And good reading skills are needed in every subject of the curriculum.

***b. As the Fordham Institute review notes, Indiana’s ELA standards are often accompanied by an example that makes it clear what the standard means in a classroom and what level of reading difficulty teachers should aim for.*** Hardly any appear in Common Core.

The adoption and implementation of Common Core’s ELA standards thus represent several steps backwards for Indiana (and any Common Core state no matter what the quality of their own reading/literature standards were). First, the sheer number of writing versus reading standards in Common Core is apt to mean more weight on writing than on reading in its classrooms—a continuation of a problem that began with the formal discovery of the “writing process” in the 1960s and 1970s. Time for the “process” had to come from something else in the curriculum since the school day was not lengthened, nor the school year extended, in any state.

Second, the emphasis on writing, not reading, in Common Core’s standards is apt to mean that the tests based on these standards (whether by SBAC, PAARC, McGraw Hill, Pearson, or ACT) will reinforce this unwarranted stress. Third, the interpretation of what a standard means and the reading difficulty of the text a national test developer uses to address the standard may differ greatly from the academic expectations of Indiana’s English teachers and their choice of text for a state assessment.

Triple damage to an already badly damaged ELA curriculum, with repercussions across the entire curriculum. And, ironically, the students who will lose the most from curricula based on Common Core’s standards will be our most vulnerable ones.

### **3. Why Common Core does not make students ready for authentic college coursework**

***a. Common Core expects English teachers to spend at least 50 percent of their reading instructional time on informational texts at every grade level—something they are not trained to teach.*** It provides 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level. 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.

***b. Common Core reduces opportunities for students to develop critical thinking and college readiness.*** 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. )" As a 2006 ACT report titled “Reading Between the Lines,” noted: “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, it 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 reduces the opportunity for students to learn how to do critical thinking and, in effect, retards college readiness.

*c. Common Core's 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.

*d. 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.

**4. Why 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 with, 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. Moreover, I was the only expert on K-12 ELA standards on the Validation Committee. The Standards Development Committee itself contained no literary scholars or high school English teachers.

We did not get evidence on international benchmarking because Common Core did not seek any. It simply claims it "consulted" or was "informed by" the documents of other countries. It did not offer any research evidence to support its arbitrary division of reading instruction or its claim about the value of informational reading instruction in the English or other 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. Nor were the chief writers of Common Core's ELA standards qualified to write K-12 ELA standards and determine college readiness. Neither has ever taught in K-12 or in higher education; neither has ever written about 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.

**5. The legislature should make one or more of the following recommendations to Governor Pence and the Indiana Board of Education:**

1. Indiana should re-adopt its previous standards because they are far superior to Common Core's. They emphasize reading far more than does Common Core, they stress the kind of reading (literary study) that fosters critical thinking, and they serve as far better guides to the kind of reading that secondary students in Indiana should be assigned in the school curriculum in order to be prepared for a meaningful high school diploma, whether they choose to go to an institution of higher education, go into an occupational trade, or go into the military.

2. Indiana should 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 is an additional waste of money to implement extensive professional development on a set of damaging standards.

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