

**Testimony for the  
House Study Committee on the Role of Federal Government in Education.**

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I thank Co-Chairmen Brooks Coleman and Carl Rogers, Georgia House Study Committee on the Role of the Federal Government in Education, for the opportunity to provide comments. I begin with remarks on Common Core's Validation Committee, on which I served from 2009-2010. This committee, which was created to put the seal of approval on Common Core's standards, was invalid both in its membership and in the procedures it was told to follow. I then offer critical comments on Common Core's English language arts standards. I end by explaining why Georgia should regain control of K-12 education at the state and local level.

**Common Core's Standards Writers and Validation Committee**

Common Core's K-12 copyrighted standards were created by three private organizations, the National Governors Association, the Council for Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., all funded for this purpose by a fourth private organization, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Common Core's standards did not emerge from a state-led process and were not written by nationally known experts, claims regularly made by its advocates. In fact, the people who wrote the standards were not qualified to draft K-12 standards at all.

*Who were the standards writers and what were their qualifications?* In the absence of official information from all four private organizations, it seems likely that Achieve, Inc. and the Gates Foundation selected most of the key personnel to write Common Core's standards. Not only were no high school mathematics teachers involved, no English professors or high school English teachers were, either. Because everyone worked without open meetings or accessible public comment, their reasons for making the decisions they did are lost to history. To this day we do not know why Common Core's high school mathematics standards do not provide a pathway to STEM careers or why David Coleman was allowed to mandate a 50/50 division between literary study and "informational" text at every grade level from K-12 in the ELA standards, with no approval from English teachers across the country or from the parents of students in our public schools.

The absence of relevant professional credentials in the two standards-writing teams helps to explain the flaws in these standards, on which costly tests are based and scheduled to be given in Georgia in 2015-2016. The "lead" writers for the ELA standards, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, had never taught reading or English in K-12 or at the college level. Neither has a doctorate in English, nor published serious work on curriculum and instruction. They were virtually unknown to English language arts educators and to higher education faculty in rhetoric, speech, composition, or literary study.

None of the three lead standards-writers in mathematics, Jason Zimba, William McCallum, and Phil Daro, the only member of this three-person team with teaching experience, had ever developed K-12 mathematics standards before. Who wanted these people as standards-writers and why, we still do not know. No one in the media showed the slightest interest in their qualifications or the low level of college readiness they aimed for on a grade 11 test. Zimba was

reported in the official minutes of a public meeting the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in March 2010 as saying: "...the concept of college readiness is minimal and focuses on non-selective colleges." The video tape of the meeting provides the context for his statement.<sup>1</sup>

***Who were members of the Validation Committee?*** The federal government could have funded an independent group of experts to evaluate the soundness and rigor of the standards it was incentivizing the states to adopt via the Race to the Top grant competition, but it did not do so. Instead, the private organizations that chose the standards writers and created Common Core's standards also created their own Validation Committee (VC) in 2009 of 25-29 members to exercise this function. The VC contained almost no academic experts on ELA and mathematics standards; most were education professors or associated with testing companies, from here and abroad. There was only one mathematician on the VC—R. James Milgram—although there were many mathematics educators on it, i.e., people with appointments in an education school and/or who worked chiefly in teacher education. I was the only nationally recognized expert on English language arts standards by virtue of my work in Massachusetts and for Achieve, Inc.'s American Diploma Project.

***Why didn't I sign off on Common Core's standards?*** Professor Milgram and I were two of the five members of the VC who did not sign off on the standards. So far as we could determine, the Validation Committee was intended to function as a rubber stamp even though we had been asked to validate the standards. Despite repeated requests, we did not get the names of countries whose standards were supposedly used as benchmarks for Common Core's. So far as I could figure out, Common Core's standards were intentionally not made comparable to the most demanding sets of standards elsewhere. It did not offer any research evidence to justify its omission of high school mathematics standards leading to STEM careers, its stress on writing over reading, its division of reading instructional texts into "information" and "literature," its deferral of the completion of Algebra I to grade 9 or 10, and its experimental approach to teaching Euclidean geometry. 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 lack of an authentic validation of Common Core's so-called college-readiness standards and the failure by the U.S. Department of Education to provide internationally benchmarked standards to the states, as it promised to do in its Race to the Top application material before state boards voted to adopt these standards, suggests to me that their votes had no legal basis.

## **Flaws in Common Core's English Language Arts Standards**

***1. Most of Common Core's reading standards are content-free skills.*** Most of the statements that are presented as vocabulary, reading, and literature standards point to no particular level of reading difficulty, little cultural knowledge, and few intellectual objectives. These statements are best described as skills or strategies when they can be understood at all and therefore cannot be described as rigorous standards. Common Core's ELA standards (and its literacy standards for other subjects) do not specify the literary/historical knowledge that students need for authentic college-level work. The document provides no list of recommended authors or works, just examples of "quality and complexity." The standards 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

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pioneerinstitute.org/news/video-common-core-lead-writer-jason-zimba/>

areas, students are not prepared for active citizenship in an English-speaking country. In addition, they are robbed of their own civic and cultural inheritance as Americans.

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**2. *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 almost every grade level in Common Core, a serious imbalance. This is the opposite of what an academically sound reading/English curriculum should contain. The foundation for good writing is good reading. Students should spend far more time in and outside of school on worthwhile reading than on writing in every subject of the curriculum.

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**3. *Common Core’s writing standards are developmentally inappropriate at early grade levels.*** While most adults know what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are, most children don't. They 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, but they are not.

**4. *Common Core expects English teachers to spend at least half of their reading instructional time on informational texts—something they cannot teach.*** Common Core lists 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level, reducing literary study in the English class to less than 50%. However, 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 fragmented information on a variety of contemporary, practical, or historical topics.

**5. *Common Core fails to develop critical thinking.*** Critical thinking is based on knowledge gained from courses in the content areas and on the development of analytical thinking in the English class--when students learn how to read between the lines of complex literary works. It cannot take place in an intellectual vacuum. Reducing literary study in the English class not only cheats students of instructional time for learning how to do read analytically but also, in effect, retards college readiness.

**6. *Common Core’s standards are not “fewer, clearer, and deeper.”*** They may appear to be fewer in number than those in many states because very different objectives or activities are often bundled incoherently into one “standard.” As a result, they are not clearer or necessarily deeper.

### **Summary**

- (1) Common Core’s ELA standards are NOT rigorous or internationally benchmarked and will not make 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, a bizarre pedagogy promoted by the chief architect of Common Core’s ELA standards.

### **Why Georgia Needs to Regain Control of K-12 Education at the State and Local Level.**

**1. *Georgia should re-adopt the standards it had before Common Core. They were far better than Common Core’s standards in English and mathematics.*** In adopting Common Core, Georgia agreed to accept its standards verbatim. The private 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. Georgia had culturally rich and challenging standards for two courses on the Literature and History of the Old and New Testament. Those courses will quickly disappear from your high school curriculum because their content will never be required, taught, or assessed by Common Core.

All state standards need to be reviewed and revised if needed at least every five to seven years by identified Georgia teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences, and parents. In addition, all state assessments should be reviewed by Georgia 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. Georgia 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 getting the rotting peaches out of the peach basket now.

***2. Georgia needs to raise the academic bar for all teacher and administrator training programs in the state to ensure that the graduates of its education schools can teach to or supervise stronger academic standards than Common Core's.*** Raising the floor for all children should be our primary educational goal. The only thing we know from high quality education research on teacher effectiveness is that effective teachers know the subject matter they teach. The legislature needs to raise the academic bar for admission to every teacher and administrator preparation program in your education schools. That is the first step needed for raising student achievement in this country. To that end, I recommend adoption of the many teacher licensure tests I helped to develop in Massachusetts at the same time as I was revising or developing our first-rate K-12 standards in ELA, mathematics, science, and history. They are available at no cost to the state because licensure fees are paid by those who take licensure tests.

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