

**Invited Testimony for a Hearing in Pennsylvania on
Common Core's Standards**

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I thank State Senator Michael Folmer, Chair of the Senate Education Committee; Lloyd Smucker, Vice Chair; and other members of the Committee (Andrew Dinniman, Joseph Scarnati, Patrick Browne, Jake Corman, Stewart Greenleaf, Robert Tomlinson, Daylin Leach, Robert Teplits, Anthony Williams), for the opportunity to provide written testimony explaining why Common Core's non-rigorous standards and the tests based on these poorly written standards will not develop critical thinking or college readiness. I suggest what Pennsylvania can do to upgrade its state standards and tests.

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. Why Common Core's English standards are not rigorous and lack a research base, international benchmarking, and qualified authors**
- 2. Why they will reduce college readiness and the ability to do "critical" thinking**
- 3. How the English class can prepare students for authentic college coursework**
- 4. What Pennsylvania can do to increase student learning in all subjects**

1. Why Common Core's English standards are not rigorous and lack international benchmarking and qualified authors

Common Core's college-readiness standards are chiefly empty skills. That is why they are not rigorous; skills training (e.g., how to use Google or find a main idea) alone cannot prepare students for college. High school students need to be taught how to understand the content of difficult and complex literary texts in order to "read between the lines" and do analytical thinking. Unfortunately, Common Core expects English teachers to spend less than 50 percent of their reading instructional time on literary texts at every grade level. It sets forth 9 standards for literary texts and 10 reading standards for informational texts at every grade level, K-12. (An informational text conveys information about something, e.g., gravity, bicycles, World War II.)

Common Core's middle school writing standards are an intellectual impossibility for average middle school students. Most children have a limited understanding of what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are, and Common Core's writing standards are not linked to appropriate reading standards and prose models to develop their understanding. Moreover, Common Core confounds the difference between an academic argument (explanatory writing) and persuasive writing.

Common Core's standards are not internationally benchmarked or research-based. 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 were we given citations for research evidence supporting the idea that an increase in instruction in informational reading in English or other classes will make students college-ready. Jason Zimba, one of the mathematics standards-writers for Common Core, told the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education at a public meeting in March 2010 that college-readiness means readiness for admission to a non-selective community college.

Common Core's ELA standards have no research base. Reading researchers acknowledge there is no research to support Common Core's claim about the value of informational reading instruction in English or other classes for college-readiness. Not one of the organizations or individuals that developed these standards (CCSSO, NGA), promoted them (NASBE, PTA, Achieve, Inc.), or examined their validity (David Conley at the University of Oregon and William Schmidt at Michigan State University) offers evidence that Common Core's standards meet current entrance requirements for most colleges and universities in this country or elsewhere. The Gates Foundation not only funded these scholars and organizations but also chose the chief writers of Common Core's English language arts and mathematics standards (David Coleman and Jason Zimba). Neither has ever taught in K-12 or published anything on curriculum and instruction in K-12.

Summary: 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. Why they will reduce college readiness and the ability to do "critical" thinking

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.

Common Core reduces what English teachers are trained to teach: literary study and literary/historical knowledge. English teachers are not prepared as literature majors to teach informational texts. They are prepared to teach literature and literary/historical knowledge. But Common Core does not specify in its standards the literary/historical knowledge students need. It offers no 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.

3. How the English class can prepare students for authentic college coursework.

In the English class, the study of complex literature, not informational texts, leads to college readiness. Literary study was the focus of the Massachusetts 1997 and 2001 ELA standards, helping Bay State students to get to first place in grades 4 and 8 on NAEP's reading tests in 2005 and to stay 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. The decline in readiness for college reading from the 1960s onward (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.

4. What Pennsylvania can do to increase student learning in all subjects

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 all 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. Massachusetts also has an outstanding network of 26 regional career-technical high schools for grades 9-12, most with long waiting lists. Students in these schools must pass the same tests that students in other high schools do, and the opportunity to work simultaneously on occupational skills of their choice motivates them to pass state tests at a higher rate than students in other high schools do.

Final Comments

Let me repeat some basic facts first. (1) Common Core's standards are NOT internationally benchmarked and will not make our students competitive. (2) Common Core's standards are NOT rigorous. Would any state have adopted them if it weren't told they were rigorous? (3) There is NO research to support Common Core's stress on "informational" reading instruction in the English class or in any other high school subject. (4) Pennsylvania does not need Common Core to find out how its students compare with Iowa's. It can use NAEP's results to find out.

All state standards should be reviewed and revised if needed at least every 5 to 7 years by identified Pennsylvania teachers, discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences at the many fine colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, and parents. All state assessments should be reviewed by Pennsylvania 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 test items are to remain a secret to the public.