

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Patricia Sorrentino, and I am an English/Language Arts teacher in an alternative school in New Haven. It is because I have found Common Core to be so valuable to me as a teacher that I am writing to testify in opposition to H.B. 5078, "An Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards."

In my career, I've heard a lot of criticisms about the process by which teachers implement curriculums. Administrators advise us to follow the pace of the curriculum, while angry parents shout that we're only teaching to the test. Many teachers feel frustrated by the idea that those who are writing our curriculums don't actually know the student populations we're trying to educate. As a teacher in an alternative high school who struggles to engage her students in the works of Shakespeare, Harper Lee, and Kathryn Stockett, I know what it means to feel bogged down by "cookie-cutter" curriculum that's fed to teachers by people who are not in touch with what it feels like to teach. I want a chance to write the curriculum for my own students, because I know better than anyone what will engage them.

Common Core is exactly the type of initiative that gives me that chance.

When I first heard about Common Core, I thought, "Great...just what our education system needs—more unnecessary paperwork that takes away from teachers' main focus: their students." However, through professional developments and research, I have found Common Core to be a gold mine. Many college courses at Southern Connecticut State University (where I earned my degree) taught me to establish a desired outcome and then work backwards from that outcome to create a lesson or unit. By using the Common Core standards as my desired outcome, I find that I, as a teacher, can create engaging units for my students. It's such a valuable experience.

Here's an example. Let's focus on Common Core Literacy Standard SL.9-10.1: "Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively."

This single sentence describes a huge and time consuming skill; we are asking teachers to bring students in 9th and 10th grade to a mastery level where they can have a group discussion and expand upon each others' thoughts. That's tough. It takes a high level of comprehension. However, Common Core allows teachers to spend their time however they want in pursuit of this lofty goal.

I tackled the problem by giving my students the option of choosing any debatable topic (risky, I know, but sometimes we have to trust that our students will step up to the plate). The idea was to get them excited and engaged so that

they can start building skills in collaborative discussion and communication. I found that, since my students chose their own topic, they had an interest in the readings, discussions, and final project that culminated in this unit. They spent weeks analyzing texts, working one-on-one, in small groups, and in whole class group discussions. All the work they were doing prepared them for their final project: the class was broken up into two groups and we held a formal debate. I was so impressed by the work my students did and the pride they took in their final project.

We posted the Common Core standard on our classroom bulletin board, and we derived the students' rubrics from the Common Core rubrics. My students showed me that once they understood the expectations, they could rise to the occasion—even though the expectation was so high. For the first time in my teaching career, I was breaking up arguments—not over who'd disrespected whom at the party last night—but over a topic the students were well-versed in due to their research.

As a teacher, I have no problem admitting that sometimes we teachers dislike “new” things and are quick to reject and judge. But we would be making a grave mistake if we rebelled against the Common Core. Teachers' wishes have been granted: while meeting the state and national goals set for our students, we finally get to create engaging and relevant curriculum appropriate to our audience. (Each teacher deals with a different audience, and in order to be a successful teacher, knowing your audience is key when planning lessons.)

So much great work is already underway across the state. It will take time before we all perfect the art of teaching to curricula that are aligned to the Common Core. But I urge you not to delay implementation. We have already begun this important process, and once we get adjusted to this change—students and teachers alike will benefit.