Testimony to the Education Committee in opposition to HB 5078

Stay the Course on the Common Core State Standards in Connecticut

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Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the Common Core State Standards initiative. My name is Mike Petrilli; I’m the executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education policy think tank based in Washington and in Ohio. I was honored to serve in the George W. Bush Administration; our president, Chester Finn, served in the Reagan Administration.

As a strong conservative and a strong supporter of the Common Core State Standards, I’m here to urge you to stay the course with these standards and with the Smarter Balanced assessments.

I’m here to remind you that it’s been reformers, for thirty years, ever since the Nation at Risk report during the Reagan Administration, who have been fighting for higher standards and greater accountability for our schools.

It’s been defenders of the status quo who have been arguing, all these years, that it’s “not fair” to hold schools accountable for results, because there are so many factors schools don’t control. Really, it’s not fair to expect schools to teach students to learn to read, write, and compute?

It’s been defenders of the status quo who have been arguing, all these years, that it’s “not fair” to have high expectations of kids growing up in poverty, that they face too many challenges. But it’s fair to give those kids a diploma they can’t read, or pass them along from grade to grade even if they can’t write or do math?

We all know that there’s a backlash brewing against these standards, especially on the right. Before I explain why I think this backlash is misguided, let us remember why the nation’s governors and state superintendents decided we needed higher standards in the first place.

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We all know that there’s a lot of testing in our schools today. And while nobody loves testing, it’s important to know that the advent of standards, testing, and accountability has been associated with big gains in achievement for our lowest performing students. Nationally, our lowest performing students, our lowest-income students, and our minority students are achieving one to two grade levels ahead of where their peers were in the mid-1990s. That’s dramatic progress, and it’s almost surely due, in large part, to the accountability reforms states like Connecticut adopted in the 1990s, and the nation as a whole adopted with No Child Left Behind.
That’s the good news. The bad news is that it’s come with many unintended consequences—the narrowing of the curriculum, an obsession in some schools on test prep, and a lack of focus on students at the middle or at the top. And as a result, while we’ve made huge gains for the kids at the bottom, we’ve made smaller gains for everyone else.

It’s not hard to understand why. Most states—including Connecticut, as I’ll demonstrate in a moment—set their standards, and especially their tests, at ridiculously low levels. And the No Child Left Behind Act put pressure on schools to get all students over that very low bar. So all of the attention went to the students below that bar—the lowest performing students. And they made gains. Important, historic gains worth celebrating.

But there were no incentives for schools to focus on kids at the middle, or at the top.

That’s created a really big problem. Think of it from a student’s perspective. They march through the public education system in Connecticut, they pass the state tests every year, they pass their courses (often with honors grades), and they earn a high school diploma. But because the standards for all of that have been set too low, passing the tests, or earning a diploma, doesn’t actually mean they are ready for what comes next.

So they get to college, and enroll, and take out student loans, and, if they are poor, get a Pell Grant. And then are told, “I’m sorry, you’re not actually ready for college. You have to take one, two, maybe three math classes, or one, two, three writing classes, before you can even start earning credits.”

And you can imagine how angry those young people would be. And deserve to be. “I did everything you told me to do. I passed all the exams. I passed all of my courses. I earned a diploma.” And most drop out—before ever getting past remedial education.

But because we set the standards too low—because we didn’t align the expectations of the public education system with the demands of the real world—we sent false signals for years that all was well, when in fact many students were not on track for success. We lied to kids, and to their families, and to the taxpayers.

Or imagine if a high school graduate goes straight into a workforce. They show up for a “middle skill” job, one that earns a decent living. And again, the employer says, “I’d like to hire you, but you don’t have the math or reading or writing or critical thinking skills we need.”

Lied to.

This was the problem that the nation’s governors and state superintendents were trying to tackle when they came together back in 2007 and 2008 to talk about developing common, rigorous standards for English and math. Could they, working together, come up with common, high standards in these basic subjects, and provide the political cover to one another to set the bar where the real world standard really is? Could together they find the political courage to start telling the truth—that in fact our public education system is only preparing about one-third of our graduates for success in college or career, and that we need to do much better? And could raising the bar help us get the kind of progress for kids at the middle and at the top that we’ve seen for kids at the bottom of the performance spectrum?
That’s what this is about.

Now, let’s see how this has played out here in Connecticut.

Let’s start with the standards Connecticut had in place before the Common Core. In 2010, we reviewed the English and math standards of the fifty states, and compared them to the Common Core. We’ve been doing similar reviews of state standards for fifteen years. And the results? The Core standards were good enough to earn an A-minus in math and a B-plus in English, significantly better than the grades of three-quarters of the states, and on par with the rest.

And Connecticut? Your English and math standards each received a D from our expert reviewers. In both subjects, the old standards showed some significant deficiencies.

What made your old standards relatively weak? Let me quote from our review, first for English:

*The Connecticut expectations contain some unnecessary content, and priorities are difficult to glean. The reading expectations generally place as much emphasis on content-less and often unmeasurable comprehension skills and reading “reflection” and “behaviors” as they do on important content...[In addition] no requirements exist for the study of American literature, a major flaw in the reading expectations.*

And for math:

*The coverage of arithmetic is inadequate. The standards do not adequately specify that students have automaticity, or quick recall, of basic number facts. These are the basic building blocks for future mathematics; students who are still struggling with basic facts are not prepared to move on to the next level of mathematics. Many computational standards specify the use of a “variety of strategies,” rather than standard methods and procedures. This undermines the goal of fluency with the standard algorithms.... [In High school] The geometry coverage is minimal. There is no specific mention of most major theorems, including theorems about triangles and circles. [Other] Missing content includes factoring, the quadratic formula, and completing the square.*

Now, perhaps Connecticut could have overcome the weaknesses in its standards by producing a rigorous test. But that has not been the case. For years, the state set its proficiency cut scores—the level of reading and math skills that it took to get a passing score—far below the levels necessary to be college and career ready.

Is it any wonder, then, that many young people in Connecticut arrive at college unprepared to do college level work? And are then dumped into remedial education, meaning that their parents, or taxpayers, have to pay twice for a high school education? According to a recent study, Connecticut could have saved some $84 million in 2007-08 on such remediation. Even young people in Connecticut looking to a career in the military run into roadblocks: About one in four failed the United States Army’s Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery.

So let me ask you: Is this good enough for Connecticut? I don’t think so, and I don’t think you think so. Connecticut clearly needs a new approach.
Enter the Common Core State Standards

In the mid-2000s, the nation’s governors and state superintendents started to acknowledge that their own standards and tests were not rigorous enough to prepare students for what comes next: Either college or a good paying career. So they agreed to collaborate on a new set of standards that would be guided by the best research and evidence, be modeled after the standards of high performing states and nations, and that would ensure that high school graduates would be ready for success in college and career. At the end of the process were the Common Core State Standards.

They aren’t perfect. As I mentioned earlier, they received an A-minus and a B-plus from our reviewers, respectively, for math and English. But they’re pretty darn good. Unlike Connecticut’s old standards, the math standards are incredibly solid on arithmetic, expecting students to know their math facts cold, to memorize their multiplication tables, to use standard algorithms, and not to use calculators until they are older. The English standards ask schools to bring back rigorous content in history, science, art, music, and literature. That’s why E.D. Hirsch, founder of the Core Knowledge program and author of Cultural Literacy, is so encouraged by them. They expect that students read great works of literature and solid non-fiction sources too, like the nation’s founding documents.

The Common Core Standards don’t “dummy down” education. They smarten up education! And when combined with a solid curriculum—which is still the province of local school boards, as it should be—the standards should lead to significantly stronger teaching and learning in the classroom.

So why is there so much controversy? I have traveled the country a lot in the past six months, especially to red states, and it’s clear to me that conservatives have two main concerns.

- First, that the standards are creatures of the federal government.
- And second, that the standards open the door to inappropriate intrusions into our children’s privacy.

Let’s talk about the federalism concern.

Frankly, I have sympathy with the critics. It’s certainly true that President Obama politicized the standards by taking credit for them every time he had a chance on the campaign trail—and when he did it again in last year’s State of the Union address. And it sure doesn’t help that his Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, seems to go out of his way to belittle opponents of these higher standards. So it’s no surprise many people have a misunderstanding about the role the federal government played in the development of the standards. In fact, the Associated Press had to issue a correction when they mistakenly said the standards were created by the federal government.

But the history is very clear. These standards started out as a state-led effort. It was the governors and state superintendents who came together, voluntarily, to draft higher common standards, because they acknowledged that their own state standards were set too low. There was already momentum behind the standards when the Obama administration intervened.
Thankfully, Republicans in Congress are working to ensure that not another cent of federal funding, and not a whiff of federal coercion, is allowed going forward when it comes to the Common Core.

The Common Core started out as state standards, and they need to remain state standards. Washington needs to butt out.

And what about privacy? Some critics of the Core Standards have alleged that they open the door to invasions of privacy, to data warehouses that will allow the government to snoop on our children and families or even sell sensitive data to for-profit companies.

This is simply not true.

As a parent of young children, I definitely worry about privacy, and the NSA revelations are truly unsettling. But there’s nothing, repeat, nothing about the Core standards that require a particular data collection or an assault on privacy, as even the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey, one of Common Core’s sharpest critics, acknowledges.

Connecticut has strong data privacy laws and practices but could further strengthen them if legislators so chose. However, to be clear, if the Common Core were dispensed with tomorrow, that would not in any way address these fears about data privacy.

**Common Core: A conservative victory**

Let me finish with a question. If Connecticut backs away from the Common Core, or the Smarter Balanced assessments, then what? Are you really going to return to your mediocre standards and easy tests? If not, what process will get you to better standards than you have right now? Perhaps even more critically, if you don’t use the common assessments, how are you going to develop an alternative in time for next school year? An independent study in Indiana found that if that state pulled out of the common assessments, it would have to spend $30 million to replace it with something home grown.

Connecticut took a big step forward with the Common Core. Your educators are three years into this effort. Teachers have been retrained. New textbooks purchased. A new assessment is about to be field tested. Higher standards finally have momentum. Don’t slow down—or turn back—now.

These new standards and tests are part of a larger effort to give all young people in Connecticut a chance to live their dreams—to get a good education, a good job, and enjoy the good. And together with similar efforts in other states, it’s part of an effort to make sure that we have an education system worthy of our great country. We shouldn’t cede our leadership to anyone—not to Europe, not to Japan, certainly not to China. To remain competitive, and to remain the leaders of the world, we need to prepare our next generation of students for that position of leadership.

You are making progress. Keep it going. Thank you and God Bless America.

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