

Testimony of Wendy Lecker Regarding Common Core State Standards  
Education Committee  
March 12, 2014

Dear Chairs Stillman and Fleischmann and members of the Committee.

Thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony today.

Public Input?

First, I must respectfully point out that holding a hearing in Hartford at 12 noon on a weekday effectively precludes any input from three sectors most affected by the Common Core State Standards and their accompanying standardized tests: teachers, students, and working parents like me.

I am a Stamford resident, taxpayer and parent of three children. My oldest is a graduate of Stamford public schools. Despite not being exposed to the Common Core, she clearly had a Connecticut public education that prepared her for college, where she is a freshman- she is currently a straight A student. I also have a senior in high school and an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, also in Stamford public schools.

The manufactured need for national standards

I have read over and over again, from US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on down, that national standards are needed because low standards are the cause of educational inequities in this country.<sup>1</sup> The claim is that without national standards, we cannot ensure that all students will be “college and career ready.”

The reality is that national standards have never been proven to raise achievement. Countries with national standards fare no better on international tests than countries without national standards.<sup>2</sup> States with “higher standards” fare no better on NAEP than states with “lower” standards.<sup>3</sup> Here in Connecticut, we had statewide consistent standards with very different results in different districts.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence proving that national standards are not the key to student success comes from a recent study of college success. The study, co-authored by former Bates College Dean of Admissions William Hiss, examined more than 123,000 student records at public and private

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/duncan-pushes-back-attacks-common-core-standards>

<sup>2</sup> Mathis, W. J. (2010). The “Common Core” Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool? Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved [date] from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/common-core-standards>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Matthews, Jay, “Why National Common Core Standards Will Fail,” Washington Post, February 23, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/class-struggle/post/why-common-core-standards-will-fail/2012/02/23/gIQATLgbUR\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/class-struggle/post/why-common-core-standards-will-fail/2012/02/23/gIQATLgbUR_blog.html)

universities across the country, universities serving predominately minority students and art schools.<sup>4</sup> It compared those who submitted SAT or ACT scores for admission to those who did not.

The authors found students with strong high school records succeeded in college, despite lower standardized test scores. Strong testers with lower GPAs had lower college performance. Non-submitters tended to be women, first-generation college students, PELL grant recipients, students of color and students with learning disabilities. The authors found a broad geographic appeal to non-submissions.

Earlier research reached the same conclusion. A 2006 study of 80,000 University of California students found that high school GPA was consistently the best predictor of cumulative GPA in all subjects and of graduation; as did a 2009 study of 150,000 public university students across the country.

All of the students in this study attended school prior to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Many began school well before the No Child Left Behind Act. They graduated from a variety of schools across the country, learned different curricula in states with different standards. Their GPAs did not depend on standardized tests. Yet consistently, their high school GPAs were reliable predictors of college success. If these students succeeded in American high schools, no matter what the curricula, standards or assessments, they succeeded in American colleges, public or private, large or small.

This fact undermines the claims that American students need national standards, standardized curricula and nationally standardized tests in order to be “college and career ready.” The high school teachers of students in this study accurately assessed their achievement, and taught them what they needed to know to do well in college — without common standards, scripted lessons or a nationalized test. In fact, the data show that the two national standardized tests, the SAT and ACT, were poor predictors of college success.

This is true in Connecticut, where we are near the top in college attendance and college completion.<sup>5</sup> Our teachers and our schools know how to educate our kids.

National standards are an expensive “red herring.”

#### Common Core does not make educational sense

Worse than being a red herring, the Common Core is inappropriate in many ways for our students.

#### A continuation of failed policies

First, it doubles down on the failed policies of NCLB. The National Research Council concluded that over ten years of NCLB’s test-based accountability had “zero to little effect” on student achievement. The focus of the Common Core is the common core high stakes tests. These tests are not developed by Connecticut educators. The consortium that is developing the test admits that it is not validated. SBAC claims we will have to wait and see how our kids do in college to see if the tests were a success.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nacacnet.org/research/research-data/nacac-research/Documents/DefiningPromise.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/state/#state=ny&sector=public\\_four](http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/state/#state=ny&sector=public_four)

Unfortunately, our children will not be able to come back and get a “do over” of their education if it turns out the test was a failure. The stakes are even higher than with NCLB’s failed tests. Here, a teacher’s job will depend on these invalidated test scores.

As Marc Tucker, President of the National Center for Education and the Economy said in a column today<sup>6</sup>, test-based accountability has not just failed to raise student achievement: “The damage that test-based accountability has done goes far deeper than a missed opportunity to improve student achievement. It is doing untold damage to the profession of teaching.”

As Tucker explains, teachers understand that children are whole human beings,” not vessels for vocabulary, grammar, diction and mathematical algorithms... It makes no sense at all to them to measure all their accomplishments by student scores on tests of low-level English and mathematics literacy when they want them to understand where political liberty came from and what it takes to sustain it. Reducing everything they have tried to do for their students to scores on low-level tests of two subjects makes a mockery of their work.”

Tucker continues:

Test-based accountability and teacher evaluation systems are not neutral in their effect. It is not simply that they fail to improve student performance. Their pernicious effect is to create an environment that could not be better calculated to drive the best practitioners out of teaching and to prevent the most promising young people from entering it. If we want broad improvement in student performance and we want to close the gap between disadvantaged students and the majority of our students, then we will abandon test-based accountability and teacher evaluation as key drivers of our education reform program.”

### The Common Core Tests

Yet the Common Core increases the focus on high-stakes standardized tests. Proponents claim, without any basis in fact, that these tests are somehow better- that they will measure “higher order thinking.” Those claims are false. Computer-scored tests can only measure basic text-production skills. They cannot measure analytical thinking, creativity, or even good writing style.

I tried a third grade reading test. The questions were so poorly worded; I could not guess the correct answer. The technology was difficult for me to work. The Common Core advocates “close reading”- circling words and passages, underlining and starring. None of these skills that the Common Core emphasizes can be translated to the computer screen. It is a recipe for failure. Indeed, a stellar and bright calculus teacher I know failed the eleventh grade test. Another excellent high school math teacher told me he does not know one 11<sup>th</sup> grade honors student who would pass the Common Core math test. Why are we imposing artificial failure on our children? How does that help learning?

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top\\_performers/2014/02/the\\_failure\\_of\\_test-based\\_accountability.html?cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS2](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2014/02/the_failure_of_test-based_accountability.html?cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS2)

We are also wasting precious learning time. Our district started practicing with the ipads in January –for a test in May. All for a test is unvalidated and age-inappropriate. Parents are frankly getting fed up with the needless loss of learning time. They are starting to rise up and will continue. We know good teaching and good learning. We want it back.

### Equity?

The high-stakes testing also reveals the myth that the Common Core will enhance equity in education. In fact, it will do just the opposite. In New York, where they are a year ahead of us in Common Core testing implementation, the Common Core tests have widened the achievement gap. Even more worrisome, the number of children of color scoring “below standard” skyrocketed. What is the benefit of telling a third grader s/he is “not on track” for college, based on an invalidated test? How does that build a love of learning to inspire him or her to put forth effort in school? Moreover, these tests are often used to place children in ability groups and in “accelerated” programs. Why foreclose educational opportunities to children based on flawed, too-difficult standardized tests?<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, I have heard from teachers around Connecticut that the Common Core curriculum and tests “pretend ELL students and students with disabilities do not exist.” Once again, the Common Core exacerbates the one-size-fits-all failed approach of NCLB.

### Developmentally Inappropriate

Five hundred child development experts wrote to the Common Core drafters explaining how the Common Core standards are completely developmentally inappropriate in the younger years, calling for direct instruction of inappropriately difficult academic content, and for standardized testing of young children.<sup>8</sup> Those warnings were ignored.

The Common Core is continuing a damaging trend in early elementary education. A new University of Virginia study found that kindergarten changed in disturbing ways from 1999-2006. There was a marked decline in exposure to social studies, science, music, art and physical education and an increased emphasis on reading instruction. Teachers reported spending as much time on reading as all other subjects combined. The time spent in child-selected activity dropped by more than one-third. Direct instruction and testing increased. Moreover, more teachers reported holding all children to the same standard.

There is an erroneous and damaging belief among policymakers that “earlier is better.” Thus, they have pushed curricula down to lower grades. Kindergarteners no longer play- they get timed doing addition and multiplication; they are expected to read and to discuss the “author’s message.” These are completely inappropriate activities for young children that hinder their learning later on.

---

<sup>7</sup> Carol Burris and Alan Aja, The Myth of Common Core Equity, Washington Post, March 11, 2014 ; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/03/10/the-myth-of-common-core-equity/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.edweek.org/media/joint\\_statement\\_on\\_core\\_standards.pdf](http://www.edweek.org/media/joint_statement_on_core_standards.pdf)

This drastic shift in kindergarten is NOT the result of a transformation in the way children learn. A 2011 nationwide study by the Gesell Institute for Child Development found that the ages at which children reach developmental milestones have not changed in 100 years.

For example, the average child cannot perceive an oblique line in a triangle until age 5 1/2. This skill is a prerequisite to recognizing, understanding and writing certain letters. The key to understanding concepts such as subtraction and addition is "number conservation." A child may be able to count five objects separately but not understand that together they make the number five. The average child does not conserve enough numbers to understand subtraction and addition until 5 ½ or 6.

If we teach reading, writing, subtraction and addition before children are ready, they might memorize these skills, but will they will not learn or understand them. And it will not help their achievement later on, because the children will not retain skills they don't understand.

Child development experts understand that children must learn what their brains are ready to absorb. Kindergarten is supposed to set the stage for learning academic content when they are older.

Play is essential in kindergarten. Through play, children build literacy skills they need to be successful readers. By speaking to each other in socio-dramatic play, children use the language they heard adults read to them or say. This process enables children to find the meaning in those words.

There is a wide range of acceptable developmental levels in kindergarten; so a fluid classroom enables teachers to observe where each child is and adjust the curriculum accordingly.

Two major studies confirmed the value of play vs. teaching reading skills to young children. Both compared children who learned to read at 5 with those who learned at 7 and spent their early years in play-based activities. Those who read at 5 had no advantage. Those who learned to read later had better comprehension by age 11, because their early play experiences improved their language development.<sup>9</sup>

The Common Core also ignores child development by demanding that every child reach the same benchmarks at the same time. Any parent of more than one child knows that this demand is unrealistic and wrong. It is especially unfair to any child with special needs.

### High School Standards

Proponents of the Common Core claim that the standards are fewer and go deeper to enable students to truly understand core concepts. Our experience in Connecticut contradicts these claims. For example, in 2010, the Connecticut State Department of Education compared existing Connecticut academic standards, created by Connecticut educators, to the Common Core State Standards, created by two outside private organizations. SDE declared that 92 percent of Connecticut's math standards overlapped with the Common Core math standards, with the discrepancy mostly in high school. High-

---

<sup>9</sup> Suggate, S., Schaughency, E, Reese, E. "Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier." Early Childhood Research Quarterly 28 (2013) 33-48

<http://web.uvic.ca/~gtreloar/Articles/Language%20Arts/Children%20learning%20to%20read%20later%20catch%20up%20to%20children%20reading%20earlier.pdf>

school math teachers across Connecticut told me that the chief difference was that the Common Core re-injected extraneous, difficult concepts that districts had previously jettisoned because they detracted from students' solid understanding of core concepts.

This result is exactly the opposite of the deep learning of core subjects that the Common Core promises.

### What matters in school

We know what it takes to help students succeed in school and in life- and it has nothing to do with national standards. Courts across this country have ruled that all children must be entitled to basic educational resources, including: high quality preK, small class size in the early grades, extra help for at-risk students, adequate facilities, extra-curricular activities and enrichment, adequate instrumentalities of learning and a rich and diverse curriculum, and school integration. Since outside factors have more to do with the achievement gap than what occurs inside school<sup>10</sup>, we as a society must redress the societal injustices children experience. Scientists know that toxic stress, i.e. prolonged stress in a child's life caused by violence, instability and poverty, among other things, inhibits brain development exactly in those areas of the brain associated with learning. Our efforts to address learning gaps must extend beyond the school walls.

Paying for new curricula, professional development, tests for an unnecessary set of standards that are completely unproven diverts our scarce resources away from those methods that are proven to help children succeed in school and in life.

### "Drive-by "education policy

I could continue for hundreds of pages with additional objections to the Common Core. I will not bore you further. I will simply ask you to fulfill your duty to our children as legislators. I am tired of the blind adoption of expensive educational policies with no examination of whether they will be successful. Connecticut used to be known for its careful consideration of evidenced-backed education policies. Our BEST teacher induction program was lauded across the nation. In the past, we called on Connecticut expert educators to craft our standards. They would go through fifty iterations, with input from representatives from all sectors of our society, and take up to three years to finalize. The Common Core, by contrast, was developed in secret by two private organizations. The final draft was made public in June 2010, and adopted by our State Board of Education in July 2010. In 2005, in a study by Gary Miron commissioned by ConnCAN, Connecticut was praised for its restrictive, careful and deliberate process for approving charter schools. Now, charter schools are proliferating left and right, without regard to their segregative effect and lack of success in "helping" any of the districts in which they are situated.

---

<sup>10</sup>Sean Reardon, No Rich Child Left Behind, New York Times, April 7, 2013

[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/no-rich-child-left-behind/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/no-rich-child-left-behind/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0) ("It may seem counterintuitive, but schools don't seem to produce much of the disparity in test scores between high- and low-income students")

It seems that our leaders today jump on the bandwagon of every unproven (or disproven) educational fad without any demand for facts or evidence. It is time to stop the “drive by” educational policies that will do lasting damage to our public schools and our children.

You have the chance to pause and demand evidence supporting the promises the Common Core makes before more damage is done to our children and our schools. You have the opportunity to demand an analysis of the cost of Common Core implementation. You have the opportunity to demand the evidence of the effects, positive and negative, of high-stakes standardized testing. I respectfully request that you not let this opportunity pass you by. Please put Connecticut back on the right track toward thoughtful and helpful policies that are designed to help children, not those standing to make money off the backs of our children.

Thank you.

Wendy Lecker  
98 Larkspur Road  
Stamford, CT 06903