

Testimony on HB 5078
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March 2014

Regarding HB5078, a bill concerning a delay to implementation of Common Core Standards and the tests based on them until their effects on teaching and learning have been examined.

My name is Rhonda Villanova. I have three sons, two in college and one in 6th grade. I have been involved with the Ellington School system for over 15 years as a volunteer through the PTO; I am currently a board member at our youngest son's school. I have also taught after-school programs at the middle school, assisted and supervised activities of our high school theater group and substituted for the elementary grades for a number of years. I have paid attention to the education our older two sons received from our town's schools. I have met wonderful teachers who were dedicated to teaching and their students. Although there are still great, dedicated teachers at our schools, something has changed. We have lost about 40 of those experienced, dedicated teachers over the past three years, at all levels, and Ellington is not a huge district. I'm not exactly sure when our schools started applying the new Common Core Standards. I attended meetings as a PTO Board member with our Superintendent at which he announced only two years ago that we had signed on to the new Smarter Balanced Assessment testing. It was only through trying to find more information about the new testing that I discovered Common Core attached to the Race to the Top program. I have attended every PTO meeting since that announcement. I have read every piece of paper that gets sent home with our son. I was at the school, involved with the teachers to some extent and no one has mentioned anything about how these new standards were going to be applied; how they were going to change what was being taught. Upon questioning, one teacher said they were "infusing" the standards upon current curriculum. That response would be informative if I had any proof of what the current curriculum was. For over a decade I participated in the first week of school ritual of covering books. For the past two years, I haven't covered any books. So we have no idea what the curriculum covers or how it is taught.

Almost three years ago, our youngest son, who loved and continues to love learning, started having trouble in school. Something about the way math and writing were being taught seemed to bother him. I didn't realize that any changes had been made in how those subjects were taught at the time. We were focusing on our son. The teachers were saying something was wrong with him and he needed to go to counseling. Our son always came home and did his homework right away, it was never an issue. Over the course of the past two years, homework, especially math, has become a major issue. He has cried about not understanding what was being asked. Previously, even if he didn't understand in the classroom, he could come home and without distraction figure it out. Now, in 6th grade, he is feeling defeated. He has begun putting his homework off until later. My husband and I are math people, we use math for many things and have taught all three of our children the importance of math. Our oldest son, majoring in math, was upset recently because he couldn't fit Calculus 6 into his schedule. Our second son won a partial scholarship due to his math scores on the SAT. Our youngest was enjoying math and knew all of his math "facts" so for him to be confused in math was concerning. When he first started having trouble, I asked to look at it. It seemed to me, a former systems engineer, an illogical problem. Upon further inspection, I realized the "going deeper into the math" standard is taught by

teaching in a Jeopardy fashion. The students are given a set of fractions and asked to create a scenario – a question – to get those fractions as an answer. They must explain what steps they took to get the answer, write how they equalized the fractions in detail. However, the focus of the exercise is not if they are right or wrong, but did they explain it well.

Also three years ago, our youngest was having issues with how writing was taught. I say this because he was already writing books, stories and graphic novels of his own at home. Our son seemed to have a knack for dialogue, character, and story structure. Initially, we thought he was bored in class and he very well may have been. Again, he had trouble understanding what was being asked of him, the instructions seemed confusing when explained by the teacher. He would come home, sit down and have to finish what wasn't done in class. His teacher didn't believe he was doing it on his own because she hadn't seen him do the work. He started staying after school so they could see he was doing his own work, without the distraction of the classroom. What seemed to be the biggest problem in the actual teaching of the writing was they needed to see each and every step of the students work: show this part, this part and this part. If a student already knows how to put the parts together, demonstrates that they can, they are still asked to pull the pieces apart like a Jenga tower just to prove they know which part is which. My son grew aggravated with the process. He was not alone.

Having access to other parents, teachers, schools, and students, gave me an insight to how the pieces of an education fit together. Hearing what other parents felt were issues, seeing how the teachers were struggling with teaching something that I wasn't aware had changed until two years ago, broke my heart – for the teachers and the students. At our son's 5th grade Open House the number of gasps uttered when they announced vocabulary was no longer being taught and only occasionally corrected, was audible. At this year's Open House, they announced the grading system was going to change under the new standards and several parents asked, "What new standards?" There is a major disconnect when not only parents who are able to be involved at the school don't know what changes have occurred, but when busy parents aren't aware of the biggest changes happening in schools across the state and have to scramble to figure it out. The schools and Boards of Ed need to inform the parents of what is going on, not after it has taken place, but before, during and after the implementation. Parents should be included in the process. Local Boards of Education should be included and in control of the education in their district. To do otherwise is breaking our state and U.S. Constitutions. The Executive Director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, Chris Minnich, stated at the education forum held recently, "there is no mandate to do CCSS in any federal statute" and that we could "do whatever we want with the standards." We should be taking a step back to determine if new standards are needed on a district by district basis. We should not be mandating all schools change if what they were doing was successful. Share strategies within the state to improve those schools that need it and keep control of school districts at the local level.

Thank you.