



# RIDGEFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Testimony to the Education Committee, Connecticut General Assembly  
Public Hearing, March 12, 2014  
Re: HB- 5078; an Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the CCSS**

Dear Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:

The Common Core State Standards were adopted in Connecticut in 2010. Since then, each Connecticut school district has worked to implement them. The CCSS represent a consistent set of academic standards across the state. This is not new; Connecticut always has defined a set of learning standards. Like everything else, standards evolve. The CCSS are the newest iteration; we would be arrogant to think they will be the last.

As district leaders, our focus is on the children in our local classrooms. Standards define what our students should know and be able to do academically. Inside schools, standards are specific educational goals defined by subject and grade level.

The reason I am providing testimony is that the CCSS have become part of loud discussions far removed from the classrooms and tangled up with new state testing and teacher evaluation systems. As a superintendent, I believe it is important to address the concerns, untangle the issues, and tone down the rhetoric so we can remain focused on student learning in our districts.

First, I hear several concerns that are directly related to the CCSS. To start, some believe the CCSS are too difficult or developmentally inappropriate. Please consider:

The CCSS look to correct past criticism of standards not only in CT but also other states as being “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Instead, the CCSS focus on a narrower range of topics and they delve deeper.

The CCSS build on older standards by increasing the emphasis on critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving.

We do need to ensure that the CCSS, like prior state standards, are not carved in stone. Prior standards were reviewed and revised on a regular basis based on local district feedback and assessment results. Once we get past the implementation phase, there should be a similar process. I expect the Connecticut State Department of Education will implement this “best practice” approach.

Compared to past standards, the CCSS do represent increased rigor. But we always set new challenges in education. For example, I am old enough to remember the national wake-up call about math and science that Sputnik inspired. I also remember the assumptions that girls were not good at math or science, that special education students had to learn separately, that Algebra was too hard for middle school students, that only a select few students should take Advanced Placement courses, that Shakespeare was reserved for high school students, and that young children could not handle full-day kindergarten.

We should remember that under the guidance of skilled teachers and supportive parents, students always impress us by what they can do. As an educator, I support and appreciate that the new CCSS emphasize understanding of complex concepts and the higher-order thinking skills required for students to be successful in college and careers in a fast-paced, increasingly connected global environment.

Another concern about CCSS has centered on their national scale. However:

The CCSS have garnered much attention in large part because 44 other states have adopted them. As a Connecticut superintendent, I believe that if the CCSS simply were the new standards for us in Connecticut, they would be a quiet issue.

Another concern is that CCSS means the loss of local control for school districts. Please remember:

Standards are not the same as the curriculum. Course outlines, units of study, materials, textbooks, reading lists, pacing guides, training, scheduling - these are all decided by local districts. The tools should support and lead to student achievement of the CCSS but there are many choices and combinations of resources, approaches, and strategies to get there.

A final general concern I have heard about is the implementation of CCSS. Please consider:

The standards were adopted in 2010 and districts are in various stages of implementation. Districts have differing roll-out or phase-in plans depending on local choices and resources. Districts are in different places regarding ELA and math standards at specific grade levels. Although we are in different places, we are definitely significantly down the road towards implementation.

It is important to understand that working towards standards is a continuous process: there is no finish line. Instead, like with prior standards, districts will regularly review progress towards the goals and determine the local adjustments needed.

From my point of view, more problematic than these general concerns is that teacher evaluation plans and new state assessments have become tangled up with the CCSS. These new systems have confused the issue about the merits of the CCSS.

I believe it is critical to understand that teacher evaluation and state assessments are related to, but still separate from, the actual CCSS. To help separate them, please consider:

Regarding teacher evaluation plans – I support the recently added flexibility and urge that the concept of flexibility be extended further. In our district, the use of rubrics for classroom observations absolutely has improved the focus and conversations with teachers about the specifics of classroom instruction. However, we are not ready to include standardized quantitative measures as part of mathematical formulas leading to a one-size-fits-all state-wide teacher evaluation rating system.

Regarding state assessment program – I support 2013-14 being a field test of the new SBAC. Even with the challenges that come with it, a field test helps us learn and practice. Please consider that it may be beneficial to extend the field-test approach to 2014-15.

There has been movement towards recognizing the need for flexibility around teacher evaluation plans and new state assessments. I believe districts will benefit from continued and expanded flexibility, especially if that flexibility includes allowing for district-level decisions. Flexibility will reduce anxiety and avoid “putting the cart before the horse” with the CCSS.

We do not need to stop the CCSS, we need to move forward. Let us keep working at the district level on the CCSS and support our focus on improving student learning in our local classrooms.

Sincerely,



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