



Stay the Course on the Common Core
Testimony to the Ohio House Education Committee

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Representatives: It's an honor to be with you today. My name is Mike Petrilli; I'm the executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-of-center education policy think tank, advocacy group, and charter school authorizer based out of Dayton. As most of you know, we also have offices here in Columbus and in Washington, DC. I was honored to serve in the George W. Bush Administration; our president, Chester Finn, served in the Reagan Administration. Perhaps most importantly, I was raised in the Midwest and lived for two years in Clarksville, Ohio. It's great to be back in the heartland.

As a strong conservative and a strong supporter of the Common Core, I'm here to urge you to stay the course with these standards and with the PARCC assessments.

Still, unlike some other Common Core supporters, I'm glad that you are holding this hearing and debating the issue of whether Ohio should stick with the Common Core. These standards were developed by the states, and to be successful, they need to be owned by the states. Our educators are all too familiar with the "flavor of the month"—reforms that come and go. They are wondering if they should wait this one out too. By having this open debate on the Common Core, you can settle the issue once and for all—and, I hope, move full speed ahead.

Today I want to address some of the common concerns we hear about the Common Core standards. Before that, though, I want to remind us what this effort to raise standards is all about.

At Fordham, we support the longstanding conservative notion that smart education reform combines two big strategies: Expanding parental choice, and setting and implementing rigorous standards. Ohio can be proud of its record on the first—school choice. Home to one of the nation's largest voucher systems, as well as an active charter school sector, the Buckeye State should be commended for its efforts to make options available to all parents that in many states are still reserved for just the well to do.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Ohio's work on standards based reform, which can best be described as mediocre.

Let's start with the standards Ohio 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 Common 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 Ohio? Your English and math standards both received a C from our expert reviewers. I think that even Common Core opponents, such as Dr. Stotsky and Dr. Milgram, would agree that Ohio's old standards were nothing to write home about.

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

Although rigorous standards addressing the comprehension and analysis of literary and non-literary text are provided, these fail to describe the amount, quality, and complexity of texts to be studied. As noted in Fordham's 2005 review of these standards, "distinctions need to be made through the grades among the three major categories of imaginative literature (fiction, poetry, and dramatic literature) with respect to their distinctive elements and devices." Doing so would provide much better guidance to teachers about the literature the students should be reading and what characteristics of it are important to know. No lists (authors and/or titles), sample passages, or commentary are included, either, making it impossible to gauge the level of rigor expected. Finally, the reading standards fail to specify expectations for the study of outstanding American literature. In fact, the lone reference (in grade 12) to America's literary heritage is not only conflated with all literature ever written, it is so vague that it is ultimately meaningless.

And for math:

The development of whole-number arithmetic is the most crucial content in early elementary school. Ohio has many developmental and supporting standards for students learning how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide whole numbers. However, they fail to culminate with computational fluency with the standard algorithms. Consider the following sequence of standards on whole-number multiplication starting with:

Demonstrate fluency in multiplication facts through 10 and corresponding division facts

This is ambiguous. It could mean to demonstrate computational fluency, or it could mean to demonstrate fluency with memory recall. Students who cannot quickly recall single-digit multiplication facts are not prepared to continue learning multiplication.

Now, perhaps Ohio could have overcome the weaknesses in its standards by producing a rigorous test. But that has not been the case. In another Fordham Institute report, [The Proficiency Illusion](#), we found that Ohio's proficiency cut scores—the level of reading and math skills that it took to get a passing score—were below the average for all states studied. They were particularly low for reading. That's saying a lot, as cut scores nationwide are notoriously low.

To be specific, we found that Ohio set its third grade reading proficiency cut score at the 21st percentile nationally. That means that you could be reading worse than 79 percent of the students in the nation, and the state of Ohio would tell you and your family and your teachers that you were doing fine.

Is it any wonder, then, that many young people in Ohio 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](#), Ohio taxpayers could have saved some \$126 million in 2007-08 on such remediation.

So let me ask you: Is this good enough for Ohio? I don't think so, and I don't think you think so. Ohio clearly needs a new approach.

Enter the Common Core

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. 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 such a big fan of them. They ensure that students read great works of literature and solid non-fiction sources too, like the nation's founding documents.

So why is there so much controversy? Let me respond to some of the major critiques:

First, that the standards themselves are flawed.

Second, that the standards are creatures of the federal government.

And third, that the standards open the door to inappropriate intrusions into our children's privacy.

The quality of the standards

Some critics allege that the Common Core standards inappropriately prioritize nonfiction over literature in language-arts classrooms.

This is based on a misreading—or deliberate manipulation—of a two-paragraph section found on page 5 of the introduction to the Common Core that mentions the NAEP assessment framework, which suggests that teachers across content areas should “follow NAEP's lead in balancing the reading of literature with the reading of informational texts, including texts in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.” Following NAEP's lead would mean that fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders would spend 50, 55, and 70 percent of their time (respectively) reading informational text.

Some critics have led people to believe that these percentages are meant to direct learning exclusively in English classrooms. They are not. In fact, the Common Core immediately clarifies that “the percentages...reflect the sum of student reading, not just reading in English settings. Teachers of senior

English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts.” Reading in social studies and science class would count too.

Dr. Sandra Stotsky and others have also charged that the Common Core will push high-quality literature out of the classroom. Balderdash. In fact, the standards devote a disproportionately large amount of attention on demonstrating the quality, complexity, and rigor of the texts students should be reading each year. Appendix A includes a list of “exemplar” texts, the vast majority of which are works written by literary giants like Thoreau, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Harper Lee, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The small number of technical documents included in these lists is dwarfed by the volume of great authors, works of literature, and literary nonfiction that the standards hold up as exemplary.

In fact, just a few weeks ago, Politifact [declared](#) the allegation that Common Core pushes classic literature out of the curriculum to be “false.”

And what about math? Some critics allege that the Common Core standards promote low-level mathematical skills or that they prioritize mathematical “practices” or “fuzzy math” over critical content. Again, a close reading of the standards reveals the opposite is true.

The Common Core math standards prioritize essential content. In the early grades, this means that arithmetic is heavily weighted, that students are asked to learn to automaticity their basic math facts, and that they are asked to master the standard algorithms. This is content they need to know—cold—in order to be prepared for the upper level math work they will do in high school and beyond. If there is one thing we know with certainty, it’s that math is cumulative. You can only move on to more advanced content when you have fully mastered essential prerequisite knowledge and skills.

Some critics complain that the standards don’t require Algebra in the eighth grade, something that many think is essential to prepare students for advanced math in high school. The reality, however, is that the Kindergarten through seventh grade Common Core standards include all of the prerequisite content students will need to have learned to be prepared for Algebra I in the eighth grade. And that means that it’s the states, districts, and/or schools who decide for themselves course and graduation requirements.

Some have implied that few mathematicians signed off on the quality of the standards. Again that’s simply not true. The committee that wrote the standards included over a dozen academic mathematicians, including its chairman, a mathematician trained at Harvard. These are not acolytes of fuzzy math. And the quality of the standards shows it.

What’s more, research by William Schmidt, a leading expert on international mathematics performance and a previous director of the U.S. TIMSS study, has compared the Common Core to the standards of high-performing countries in grades K–8. The agreement was very high between the Common Core math standards and the math standards in place in the highest performing nations. In fact, Schmidt and his colleague found that no state’s previous math standards were as close a match to those of high-performing countries as the Common Core.

Perhaps even more critically, Schmidt’s research found that “states whose previous standards were most similar to the Common Core performed better on a national math test in 2009.” That means that, across the nation and the world, students whose learning was driven by standards that closely

resembled the Common Core fared better than students who lived in states whose standards looked very different.

The Federalism concern

The second major charge against the Common Core is that they are creatures of the federal government. Here I have more sympathy with the critics. It's certainly true that President Obama politicized the standards by using federal Race to the Top dollars to coerce their adoption by the states. It got even worse when the president took credit for the common standards every time he had a chance on the campaign trail—and when he did it again in this 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 Common Core opponents.

But the history is very clear. These standards started out as a state effort, with support from private entities like the Gates Foundation. 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, in my view, 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.

Privacy concerns

Finally, some critics of the Common Core have alleged that the standards 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 recent examples of Big Government and Big Data are unsettling. But there's nothing, repeat, nothing about the Common Core that requires 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.

Ohio 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 in Ohio tomorrow, that would not in any way address these fears about data privacy.

Common Core: A conservative victory

With those rebuttals behind me, let me explain why we at the Fordham Institute are so bullish on the Common Core—why we see them as a strong conservative victory.

1. Fiscal responsibility. The Common Core protects taxpayer dollars by setting world-class academic standards for student achievement—and taxpayers and families deserve real results for their money.

2. Accountability. Common Core demands accountability, high standards, and testing—not the low expectations and excuses that many politicians and the establishment have permitted.

3. School choice. The information that comes from standards-based testing gives parents a common yardstick with which to judge schools and make informed choices.

4. Competitiveness. While the U.S. dithers, other countries are eating our lunch. If we don't want to cede the twenty-first century to our economic and political rivals—China especially—we need to ensure that many more young Americans emerge from high school truly ready for college and a career that allows them to compete in the global marketplace.

5. Innovation. Common Core standards are encouraging a huge amount of investment from states, philanthropic groups, and private firms—which, in turn, is producing Common Core-aligned textbooks, e-books, professional development, online learning, and more. Online learning especially is going to open up a world of new choices for students and families to seek a high-quality, individualized education. It's as if the whole world is moving to smart phones and tablets while you're sticking with a rotary.

6. Traditional education values. The Common Core standards are worth supporting because they're educationally solid. As I explained earlier, they are rigorous, they are traditional—one might even say they are "conservative." They expect students to know their math facts, to read the nation's founding documents, and to evaluate evidence and come to independent judgments. In all of these ways, they are miles better than what Ohio had in place before.

Let me finish with a question. If Ohio backs away from the Common Core, or the PARCC 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 the Common Core? Perhaps even more critically, if you don't use the common assessments, how are you going to develop an alternative, with less than eighteen months to go until these tests are to be given for the first time? 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. Are you prepared to spend that kind of money to placate concerns that are largely based on misinformation and fear?

Ohio 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 in the Buckeye State. Don't slow down—or turn back—now.