

Invited Testimony for a Hearing on Common Core's English Language Arts Standards

Sandra Stotsky
Professor of Education Reform Emerita
University of Arkansas
February 14, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to explain why Common Core's English language arts standards and future tests will lower student achievement in Kansas and reduce the quality of your teaching force.

My professional background: I was a senior associate commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education from 1999-2003 and, among other duties, was in charge of development or revision of the state's K-12 standards in all major subjects, licensing regulations for teachers and administrators, teacher licensure tests, and professional development criteria. I reviewed all states' English language arts standards for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 1997, 2000, and 2005. I co-authored Achieve, Inc.'s American Diploma Project high school exit test standards for English in 2004. Finally, I served on Common Core's Validation Committee from 2009-2010.

I will speak briefly to the following points.

1. Why Common Core's English language arts standards won't lead to college readiness
2. Why they lack a research base, international benchmarking, and qualified authors
3. What leads to college readiness in the secondary English class
4. Why Common Core's damaging standards cannot be changed by Kansas
5. What Kansas can do to increase student learning in all subjects

1. Common Core's English language arts standards won't lead to college readiness:

Common Core's "college readiness" standards for ELA standards have many flaws:

Common Core expects English teachers to spend over 50 percent of their reading instructional time on informational texts at every grade level. It sets forth 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level, K-12. The major problem is that English teachers are not trained to give informational reading instruction by college English departments or teacher preparation programs. In addition, there is no body of information that English teachers are responsible for teaching, unlike science teachers, for example, who are charged with teaching information about science.

Common Core reduces literary study—what English teachers are trained to teach. Common Core does not specify the literary/historical knowledge students need in its standards. It offers no specific criteria for selecting literary or informational texts for study. It provides no list of recommended authors, never mind works. It requires no British literature aside from Shakespeare. It does not require study of the history of the English language.

Common Core's middle school writing standards are an intellectual impossibility for average middle school students. Adults have a much better idea of what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are. But most children have a limited understanding of these concepts, even if Common Core's writing standards were linked to appropriate reading standards and prose models. Nor does the document clarify the difference between an academic argument (explanatory writing) and persuasive writing, confusing teachers and students alike.

Common Core's college-readiness standards are chiefly empty skills. Skills training alone doesn't prepare students for college. High school students need to be taught how to read complex literary texts in order to do "critical thinking."

It is not surprising that such deficient standards received a grade of B+ from Fordham and that Fordham claims Common Core's standards are superior to those in most states. Few know that Fordham has received at least 1 million dollars from the Gates Foundation to promote Common Core's standards. The top officials at Fordham changed the evaluation form (and grading scheme) it had used in earlier reviews of state ELA standards in order to claim that Common Core's ELA standards were better than those in most states.

2. Common Core's standards lack a research base, international benchmarking, and credible authors: Common Core's Validation Committee, on which I served, was supposed to ensure that its standards were internationally benchmarked and supported by a body of research evidence. Even though several of us regularly asked for the names of the countries the standards were supposedly benchmarked to, we didn't get them. Nor did we get citations to the supposed body of evidence supporting the idea that an increase in instruction in informational reading in English or other classes will make students college-ready.

Reading researchers have acknowledged there is no research to support Common Core's claim about the value of informational reading instruction in the English or other classes. It is also the case that the organizations that developed these standards (CCSSO and NGA) and promoted them (PTA, Achieve), as well as recent reports on the "validity" of Common Core's standards, have all been funded by the Gates Foundation. None offers evidence that Common Core's standards meet current entrance requirements for most colleges and universities in this country or elsewhere. Moreover, the Gates Foundation chose the chief writers of Common Core's standards in English language arts and mathematics. Neither has ever taught in K-12.

3. What leads to college readiness in secondary English classes? Two kinds of evidence show that the study of complex literature in the English class, not informational texts, leads to college readiness. The first is empirical: The focus of the Massachusetts 1997 and 2001 ELA standards, considered the "gold standard" among state ELA standards long before Massachusetts students scored in first place in grades 4 and 8 in reading on NAEP—and stayed there—was literary study.

The second kind of evidence is historical: From about 1900—the beginning of uniform college entrance requirements via the college boards—until the 1950s, a challenging, literature-heavy English curriculum was understood to be precisely what pre-college students needed. From the 1960s onward, the decline in readiness for college reading (acknowledged in the Common Core document) reflected in large part an increasingly incoherent, less challenging literature curriculum that was propelled by the fragmentation of the year-long English course into semester electives, the conversion of junior high schools into middle schools, and the assignment of easier, shorter, and contemporary texts—often but not always in the name of multiculturalism.

By reducing literary study, Common Core's 50/50 mandate decreases students' opportunity to develop the analytical thinking once developed in just an elite group by the vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony in classic literary texts. It also reduces the quality of those who become English teachers. Most English teachers want to teach literature, a major reason they become English teachers.

4. Common Core's standards cannot be changed: The two organizations that developed Common Core's standards have copyrighted their documents. States that have adopted Common Core's standards cannot change one word of the standards in them, even if their teachers find the standards confusing, placed at inappropriate levels, or poorly written. States can add up to 15% of their own standards but must assess this 15% themselves.

5. Why Kansas's own ELA Standards didn't increase student learning enough: One reason why the Bay State's standards seem to have been more effective than those in other states can be found in the simultaneous changes in the academic requirements for teacher and administrator training programs, licensure tests, and professional development. **The quality of a state's standards is not enough.** Raising the academic bar for admission to an education school and embedding the content of strong academic standards into its educator preparation programs, licensure tests, and professional development will over time lead to increases in achievement for all students in reading and mathematics, as it did in Massachusetts.

Final Comment

All state standards need to be reviewed and revised if needed at least every five years by identified Kansas teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences, and parents. In addition, all state assessments should be reviewed by Kansas teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences before the tests are given. This can't happen with Common Core's standards and assessments. Kansas loses control of the content of its children's education under Common Core. Its main task is to pay for its costs.