

Dr. Ken James' Testimony
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
April 29, 2009

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today about the state-led common standards initiative being guided by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (NGA). Voluntary state collaboration to develop a common core of high standards is an idea whose time has truly arrived.

I come to you today in dual roles: as the lead education officer in my home state of Arkansas and as president of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). In both of these positions, I have witnessed not only widespread support for a state-led common standards setting process, but a sincere belief that states *must* lead this effort for the good of our young people and for the good of our country.

CCSSO and NGA began to facilitate a dialogue between state leaders about the state-led common standards initiative more than two years ago. Significant progress was made during this period and a number of states are now poised to join a voluntary, state-led standards setting process, which adheres to several key principles.

First and foremost, this is a voluntary, state-led effort to establish a common core of standards across the states. Let me be clear, this is not an effort to establish federal standards. The effort to establish a common core will build directly on the recent work of leading states and initiatives that have focused on college- and career-ready standards. Leading states will be called upon to participate and add their knowledge to the standards setting process, and it is expected that leading states, based on their prior work, will be furthest along toward adoption of the common core. Furthermore, no state will see their standards lowered as a result of this collaboration. Rather, the purpose of the common state standards initiative is to raise the bar for all states by drawing on the best research and evidence from leading states and experts regarding, among other things, college- and work-readiness, rigorous knowledge and skills, and international benchmarking.

In March, President Obama made a visit to the Council of Chief State School Officers' annual legislative meeting here in Washington, D.C. The state chiefs were honored by the President's appearance, but more importantly were enthused by his support of a state-led common standards initiative. His support of a state-led approach to

addressing this important issue was echoed heartily later at the same meeting by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Two weeks ago, CCSSO and the NGA hosted a meeting for state chiefs and governors' education advisors whose states might be interested in formally joining a coalition to commit to engaging in a process that would ultimately deliver the first sets of common standards in the areas of mathematics and English language arts. That meeting occurred on April 17 in Chicago; and I am pleased to report that 40 of my colleagues along with representatives from their governors' offices attended. In addition, we were joined by representatives from Achieve, the College Board, ACT, and the National Governors Association. That makes 41 states and many key stakeholders expressing a strong interest in pursuing this goal of state-led common standards. Realizing that not all states will be able to immediately commit to this important effort, I was still extremely encouraged by the breadth of interest across the country. And I do believe that we will have a strong showing of states ready to continue the next stage of the standards development process during the coming weeks and months.

As the Arkansas Commissioner of Education, I have witnessed another level of support for common standards that I must share with you. On April 10, I met with superintendents, school board members and other school officials from across my state to discuss the education provisions of the Recovery Act. We had more than 1,100 people present, all anxious to learn about the stimulus funding, including how the money could be most effectively spent. After nearly two hours of discussing that topic, I mentioned that I would be flying to Chicago the following week to meet with my colleagues about creating state-led common standards. That was the first time the room erupted in applause.

Clearly, state-led common standards have the support and excitement from folks all the way from the President of the United States to superintendents and school board members in rural towns of Arkansas. I'd call that a broad base of support, indeed.

Here is why I think people at all levels are ready to embark on this initiative. Foremost, we are all well aware of the economic imperative for this country to take drastic steps in the realm of education to create a competitive workforce and maintain our role as a world leader. The most basic way to impact student achievement to

meet this demand is to guarantee that what is being taught in classrooms in every ZIP code of this nation is both rigorous and relevant.

Over the last several years, many individual states have made great strides in developing high-quality standards and improving their assessments. These efforts provide a strong foundation for further action. For example, a majority of states (35) have joined the American Diploma Project (ADP) and have worked individually to align their state standards with college and work expectations. Of the 15 states that have completed this work, studies show significant similarities in core standards across the states. States also have made progress through initiatives to upgrade standards and assessments, for example, the New England Common Assessment Program.

Let me tell you how that standard-setting process works in Arkansas. Every summer, we convene educators from across the state for two, intensive weeks to tackle the standards for whatever subjects are to be updated. This summer Arkansas was supposed to update English language arts. You may have detected the strain in my voice when I say "was," as I have decided to put that process on

hold with the expectation that this coalition of states will move forward in the state-led common standard-setting process.

Nevertheless, typically when those educators come to Little Rock, they engage in a process that requires rigorous hours over two weeks ensuring that they have considered the most current and relevant research and evidence leading to the delivery of the most appropriate standards for the subject at hand. Those two weeks are followed by several weekend sessions throughout the year until the standards are approved by the State Board of Education. It's a good process.

But perhaps you too see the inefficiency of replicating such efforts at least 50 times – once in each state and the territories. This redundancy is another compelling reason for states – and for my local educators – to want to move forward in the effort of state-led common standards. And, again, building on the work in many states, we already have evidence that key aspects of commonality among state standards already exist and that repeating standard setting efforts for each subject in each state is unnecessarily costly in terms of time, energy and money.

Let me end by paraphrasing something I heard Intel's chairman Craig Barrett say: business knows no borders, and business and industry will go to where the talent is.

States are not preparing our students to compete with students in the neighboring school district or even the neighboring state. We are preparing them to compete globally and, in order to do so, we must make sure that we equip students across this nation -- in areas rural and metropolitan, mountainous or Delta flatland, rich or poor -- with the learning blocks to reach the same high standards. That is the only way we, as a nation, will thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Fifty-One States And Territories Join Common Core State Standards Initiative

NGA Center, CCSSO Convene State-led Process to Develop Common English-language arts and Mathematics Standards

September 01, 2009

WASHINGTON—The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) today released the names of the states and territories that have joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative: **Alabama; Arizona; Arkansas; California; Colorado; Connecticut; Delaware; District of Columbia; Florida; Georgia; Hawaii; Idaho; Illinois; Indiana; Iowa; Kansas; Kentucky; Louisiana; Maine; Maryland; Massachusetts; Michigan; Minnesota; Mississippi; Missouri; Montana; Nebraska; Nevada; New Hampshire; New Jersey; New Mexico; New York; North Carolina; North Dakota; Ohio; Oklahoma; Oregon; Pennsylvania; Puerto Rico; Rhode Island; South Carolina; South Dakota; Tennessee; Utah; Vermont; Virgin Islands; Virginia; Washington; West Virginia; Wisconsin; Wyoming.**

In the twenty-six years since the release of *A Nation at Risk*, states have made great strides in increasing the academic rigor of education standards. Yet, America's children still remain behind other nations in terms of academic achievement and preparedness to succeed.

By signing on to the common core state standards initiative, governors and state commissioners of education across the country are committing to joining a state-led process to develop a common core of state standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. These standards will be research and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked, aligned with college and work expectations and include rigorous content and skills.

"To maintain America's competitive edge, we need all of our students to be prepared and ready to compete with students from around the world," said **NGA Vice Chair Vermont Gov. Jim Douglas**. "Common standards that allow us to internationally benchmark our students' performance with other top countries have the potential to bring about a real and meaningful transformation of our education system to the benefit of all Americans."

"As state school chiefs, we have been discussing and building momentum for state-led, voluntary common standards that are both rigorous and internationally benchmarked for the past two years," stated **CCSSO President and Arkansas Commissioner of Education Ken James**. "The broad level of commitment we have received from states across the nation for this unprecedented effort is both gratifying and exciting. It also clearly illustrates that this is an idea whose time has arrived."

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is being jointly led by the NGA Center and CCSSO in partnership with Achieve, Inc; ACT and the College Board. It builds directly on recent efforts of

standards and ensures that these standards can be internationally benchmarked to top-performing countries around the world. The goal is to have a common core of state standards that states can voluntarily adopt. States may choose to include additional standards beyond the common core as long as the common core represents at least 85 percent of the state's standards in English language arts and mathematics.

"Measuring our students against international benchmarks is an important step," said **Virginia Gov. Timothy Kaine**. "Today, we live in a world without borders. It not only matters how Virginia students compare to those in surrounding states – it matters how we compete with countries across the world."

"Only when we agree about what all high school graduates need to be successful will we be able to tackle the most significant challenge ahead of us: transforming instruction for every child," said **CCSSO President-Elect and Maine Education Commissioner Sue Gendron**. "Common standards will provide educators clarity and direction about what all children need to succeed in college and the workplace and allow states to more readily share best practices that dramatically improve teaching and learning. Our graduates and frankly, the future of our economy, cannot wait any longer for our educational practices to give equal opportunity for success to every student."

The NGA Center and CCSSO are coordinating the process to develop these standards and have created an expert validation committee to provide an independent review of the common core state standards, as well as the grade-by-grade standards. This committee will be composed of nationally and internationally recognized and trusted education experts who are neutral to – and independent of – the process. The college- and career-ready standards are expected to be completed in September 2009. The grade-by-grade standards work is expected to be completed in January 2010.

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Founded in 1908, the National Governors Association (NGA) is the collective voice of the nation's governors and one of Washington, D.C.'s most respected public policy organizations. Its members are the governors of the 50 states, three territories and two commonwealths. NGA provides governors and their senior staff members with services that range from representing states on Capitol Hill and before the Administration on key federal issues to developing and implementing innovative solutions to public policy challenges through the NGA Center for Best Practices. For more information, visit www.nga.org.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public. www.ccsso.org.