



## Testimony to the Arkansas House and Senate Interim Committees on Education

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Senators and 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 in Washington, DC that also does on the ground work in the great state of Ohio. We promote education reforms of all stripes, with a particular focus on school choice and standards-based reform. I was honored to serve in the George W. Bush Administration; my boss, Chester Finn, served in the Reagan Administration. Perhaps most importantly, I was raised upriver in suburban St. Louis, where I attended public schools. (Go Cardinals!)

I suspect that not all of my friends agree with me, but I am glad that you are holding this hearing and debating the issue of whether Arkansas 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 either change course or move full speed ahead.

I am here today to urge you to stay the course with the Common Core. I will start by responding to some of the comments you heard yesterday; several of the speakers are personal friends and we work together on many education reform issues, especially expanding parental choice and growing high quality charter schools. But on the Common Core, reasonable people on the right will disagree, and I want to rebut some of their allegations.

Then I will explain why we at Fordham see the Common Core as a great conservative victory.

### **Responding to Common Core's Critics**

You heard three major complaints about the Common Core yesterday:

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.

Let me respond.

First, about the quality of the standards themselves.

We at the Fordham Institute have been evaluating state standards for more than fifteen years. In 2010, we released a [comprehensive review](#) of the clarity, specificity, content, and rigor of every state's existing English and math standards, along with our evaluation of the final draft of the Common Core. In that analysis, the Common Core earned a B-plus from our English experts and an A-minus from our math experts. In the same evaluation, Arkansas's English and math standards earned a D and a C, respectively. By choosing to adopt the Common Core, Arkansas has dramatically boosted the quality, clarity, and rigor of its expectations in these two critical areas.

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 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 (not California's, not Indiana's, not Massachusetts's).

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.

So what about the specific critiques you heard yesterday?

Take Sandra Stotsky's allegation 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, and 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. 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 are dwarfed by the volume of great authors and works of

literature and literary nonfiction that the standards hold up as exemplary. That's one reason that E.D. Hirsch, author of Cultural Literacy and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, strongly supports the standards.

Some critics, such as Dr. Milgram, also complain 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.

Now, I respect Dr. Milgram tremendously, and I'm certainly no mathematician. But he and others have implied that few mathematicians have 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 from Harvard. These are not acolytes of fuzzy math. And the quality of the standards shows it.

### **The Federalism Concern**

The second major charge against the Common Core is that they are creatures of the federal government, akin to ObamaCare. 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 did it again in this year's State of the Union address.

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 your witnesses yesterday, acknowledges.

### **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.

We can think of six strong, conservative reasons:

**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. Arkansas has already invested time and money to implement the new standards, and many districts have already spent scarce dollars training teachers for Common Core's increased rigor. Calling for a do-over at this point would waste time and money already expended.

**2. Accountability.** Common Core demands accountability, high standards, and testing — not the low expectations and excuses that many politicians and the establishment have permitted. The Common Core standards are pegged at a high level, which will bring a healthy dose of reality to the education-reform conversation. The truth may be painful but, in the long run, it will serve your children, your educators, and your state economy far better. Conservatives have long argued for holding our students to higher standards, not accepting mediocrity.

**3. School choice.** As strong supporters of parental choice, we are often asked how to reconcile our enthusiasm for the Common Core. Doesn't it force a "one-size-fits-all" approach onto schools? The short answer: No. Standards describe what students are expected to know and be able to do. Written correctly, they do not dictate any particular curriculum or pedagogy. Plus, the information that comes from standards-based testing gives parents a common yardstick with which to judge schools and make informed choices. In the end, Common Core is not a national curriculum — the standards were written by governors and local education officials, and they were adopted by each state independently.

**4. Competitiveness.** While the U.S. dithers, other countries are eating our lunch. If we don't want to cede the 21st 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. This is why business groups support the standards — because they will help ensure that students are ready to succeed on the job.

**5. Innovation.** Common Core standards are encouraging a huge amount of investment from states, philanthropic groups, and private firms — which 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 three-quarters of the state standards they replaced—[including those previously in place in Arkansas](#)— standards that hardly deserve the name and that often pushed the left-wing drivel that Common Core critics say they abhor.

We see the Common Core as a conservative triumph. The standards are solid and traditional. They don’t give in to moral relativism, blame-America-first, or so many other liberal nostrums that have infected our public schools.

At the end of the day, the facts matter. We hope that Arkansas will be guided by them and stay the course with the Common Core. It’s really a victory for everyone.