



Sandra Stotsky on the mediocrity of the Common Core ELA standards

Parents have deep concerns about the Common Core standards and their associated assessments, signed onto by 43 states and the District of Columbia. They have been adopted and developed in a rushed manner, because of pressure from the Gates Foundation and the US Department of Education, which threatened to withhold "Race to the Top" grants from any state which did not promise to adopt them.

These standards and their assessments are likely to cost states and districts tens of billions of dollars to implement. There are also huge questions about whether these new tests will be valid and reliable; see [Julie Woestehoff's posting](#) on this. In addition, while they are supposed to test "high order thinking," they will be administered and scored by computers!

Here is a critique of the standards themselves, from Sandra Stotsky, a respected expert who helped develop the Massachusetts standards, widely regarded as the best in the nation. This is her testimony in support of a Texas bill that would retain their own state standards, and reject the Common Core. Stotsky points out how the Common Core were developed by a taskforce, the majority of whose members work for testing companies, and how the tests themselves are being crafted "behind closed doors."

Testimony for a Hearing on House Bill No. 2923 April 15, 2011

Sandra Stotsky
Professor of Education Reform
21st Century Chair in Teacher Quality
University of Arkansas
April 14, 2011

I thank Chairman Creighton and the members of his committee for the opportunity to speak in favor of House Bill No. 2923, a bill on state sovereignty over curriculum standards, assessments, and student information.

My professional background: I draw on much state and national experience with K-12 standards, curricula, and assessments. I was the senior associate commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education from 1999-2003 where, among other duties, I was in charge of the development or revision of all the state's K-12 standards. I have reviewed all states' English language arts and reading standards for the Fordham Institute in 1997, 2000, and 2005. I co-authored Achieve's American Diploma Project high school exit test standards for English in 2004. I co-authored the 2008 Texas English language arts and reading standards. Appointed by then Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, I served on the National Mathematics Advisory Panel from 2006-2008. Finally, I served on Common Core's Validation Committee from 2009-2010.

I will speak to the following points:

1. The mediocre quality of Common Core's English language arts/reading standards, especially in grades 6-12, and what its lack of international benchmarking means.
2. The high academic quality of Texas's 2008 English language arts/reading standards.
3. The non-transparent process that was used to develop Common Core's standards.
4. The non-transparent process now being used to develop a national curriculum and national tests based on Common Core's standards by the two testing consortia funded by the U.S. D.E.

Point One: Common Core's "college readiness" standards for English language arts and reading do not

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aim for a level of achievement that signifies readiness for authentic college-level work. They point to no more than readiness for a high school diploma (and possibly not even that, depending on where the cut score on tests based on these standards is set). Despite claims to the contrary, they are not internationally benchmarked.

States adopting Common Core's standards will damage the academic integrity of both their post-secondary institutions and their high schools precisely because Common Core's standards do not strengthen the high school curriculum and cannot reduce the current amount of post-secondary remedial coursework in a legitimate way. Their standards may lead to reduced enrollment in advanced high school courses and to weakened post-secondary coursework because Common Core's "college readiness" ELA/R standards are designed to enable a large number of high school students to be declared "college ready" and to enroll in post-secondary institutions that will have to place them in credit-bearing courses. These institutions will then likely be under pressure from the USDE to retain these students in order to increase college graduation rates.

Point Two: To avoid the charge of bias, I draw on Fordham's own 2010 review of Texas's 2008 English language arts/reading standards. Fordham gave the Texas standards A- and Common Core's ELA standards B+. Here is Fordham's overall judgment:

"Texas's ELA standards are more clearly written, better presented, and logically organized than the Common Core standards. The Texas standards include expectations that more thoroughly address the comprehension and analysis of literary and non-literary text than Common Core, including helpful, detailed standards that outline genre-specific content and rhetorical techniques. In addition, Texas has prioritized writing genres by grade level. Grade: A-"

Point Three: After the Common Core Initiative was launched in early 2009, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers never explained to the public what the qualifications were for membership on the standards-writing committees or how it would justify the specific standards they created. Most important, it never explained why Common Core's high school exit standards were equal to college admission requirements without qualification, even though this country's wide ranging post-secondary institutions use a variety of criteria for admission.

Eventually responding to the many charges of a lack of transparency, the names of the 24 members of the "Standards Development Work Group" were revealed in a July 1, 2009 news release. The vast majority, it appeared, work for testing companies. Not only did CCSSI give no rationale for the composition of this Work Group, it gave no rationale for the people it put on the two three-member teams in charge of writing the grade-level standards.

Another seemingly important committee, a Validation Committee, was set up with great fanfare on September 24, 2009. The 25 members of this group were described as a group of national and international experts who would ensure that Common Core's standards were internationally benchmarked and supported by a body of research evidence. Even though several of us regularly asked to examine this supposed body of research evidence, it became clear why our requests were ignored.

In December 2009, the Parent Teacher Association indicated the real role of this committee—more like that of a rubber stamp. The PTA predicted that: "both sets of standards will be approved simultaneously in February 2010 by members of the Validation Committee." Why did it think so? Why did the Gates Foundation think so, too?

Vicki Phillips and Carina Wong [both from the Gates Foundation] published an article in the February 2010 issue of Phi Delta Kappan talking about Common Core's standards as if they had already been approved. The final version of these standards didn't come out until June 2010. After submitting many detailed critiques from October 2009 to May 2010 in a futile effort to remedy the basic deficiencies of Common Core's English/reading standards, I, along with four other members of the Validation Committee, declined to sign off on the final version.

Point Four: Both testing consortia, funded by the USDE, are currently developing curriculum frameworks, models, and guides, as well as instructional materials, behind closed doors, with no public procedures for the selection of curriculum developers, for public comment and further revision, and for final public approval if what the USDE and these testing consortia are doing is lawful.

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Below are excerpts from the two testing consortia's approved applications that show clearly their intentions to develop a national curriculum. In addition, the Albert Shanker Institute issued a "manifesto" in March applauding Common Core's goals and quality and urging the development of a national curriculum based on its standards. Among the signers is the president of the Fordham Institute.

According to the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium's application to the USDE in June 2010, it intends to:

"interpret or translate [Common Core's] standards before they can be used effectively for assessment or instruction" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal. Page 34]

– "translate the standards into content/curricular frameworks, test maps, and item/performance event specifications to provide assessment specificity and to clarify the connections between instructional processes and assessment outcomes." [SMARTER Proposal, page 35]

– provide "a clear definition of the specific grade-level content skills and knowledge that the assessment is intended to measure" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page 48]

– "convene key stakeholders and content specialists to develop assessment frameworks that precisely lay out the content and cognitive demands that define college- and career-readiness for each grade level." [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page74]

– "develop cognitive models for the domains of ELA and mathematics that specify the content elements and relationships reflecting the sequence of learning that students would need to achieve college and career-readiness" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page 76]

Similarly, the June 10 application from the other testing consortium funded by the USDE, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), is planning to:

– "unpack the standards to a finer grain size as necessary to determine which standards are best measured through the various components ... To do this, the Partnership will engage lead members of the CCSS writing teams ... and the content teams from each state, assessment experts and teachers from Partnership states." [PARCC Proposal, page 174]

– "develop challenging performance tasks and innovative, computer-enhanced items ... [that] will send a strong, clear signal to educators about the kinds of instruction and types of performances needed for students to demonstrate college and career readiness." [PARCC Proposal, page 7]

– "develop model curriculum frameworks that teachers can use to plan instruction and gain a deep understanding of the CCSS, and released items and tasks that teachers can use for ongoing formative assessment." [PARCC Proposal, page 57]



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Michele Gray

Interesting article by Todd Farley about the tests that are being developed to go with the Common Core. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/...>

He says "But are the Common Core Standards really "revolutionary"? Or are they fundamentally the same as the sets of standards that currently exist in each of the 50 states, different only in their wording? That is the question I recently set out to answer, when -- in an heroic act of corporate espionage that I undertook for you, dear readers -- I stealthily broke into the computer item bank of an assessment company I used to work for to look at their test questions and standards.

What did I find? Maybe I'm wrong, but I think I found the Common Core Standards look a lot like every other set of state standards I worked with over the years (that is, a list or grid of overblown educational rhetoric describing the simple skills American students should have mastered)."

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Beth

Thank you for posting this information. Washington State essentially adopted the CCSS by not allowing a vote on them this legislative session. They were in a bill for approval but there was a lot of public outcry and the House Education Committee chair, Rep. Sharon Tomiko-Santos, removed them from the bill so the rest of the ridiculously expensive (non-funded by the way) education reform ideas in the bill could pass.

By not allowing the vote, the state adopts the CCSS because of wording in a 2010 bill. Our state's legislators have not taken the time to compare the CCSS to our current standards (the math standards were rated A by the Fordham Institute) and they just don't seem to care at all about education.

If you have not compared the CCSS standards to your own state's take the time to look. For math in Washington there are examples of what type of problems each standard addresses, there are no examples in the CCSS (at least not that I could find).

BTW, Joe Wilhoft is the former assessment guru in Washington State and he is now heading up the SMARTER assessment group. Here is this year's 10th grade writing prompt: "What is your favorite place? Explain why it is your favorite place." My 10th grader thought the question was demeaning. For the 10th grade reading test, she estimated that it was at a 5th grade level. She said she actually had to dumb down her answers to match the difficulty level of the test. She said the science test was ridiculously difficult (she is in honors biology). She said it required background knowledge that was never taught to her. She said there were only three biology questions on the test (and that is what most 10th graders in Washington take for science). I will say that her physical science teacher last year was horrible and does not teach anything--the kids teach whatever they learn to themselves but her middle school science teachers were good (there is hardly any science taught in Washington elementary schools thanks to No Child Left Behind).

In Washington, the cut scores for the state assessments are set AFTER the tests are graded so . . . there is a lot of manipulation in the pass rates. Even with the manipulation, the pass rates are very low--especially in math and even more so in science. So . . . the SMARTER assessments should be avoided at all costs!!!!!!

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Zeev Wurman

Here are video links to the testimony

Part 1

S. Stotsky Testifying Texas House of Reps. Com. on State Sovereignty Part 1 04/14/11
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v...>

Part 2

S. Stotsky Testifying Texas House of Reps. Com. on State Sovereignty Part 2 04/14/11
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