



Testimony of Chris Minnich, Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers

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Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. I look forward to talking to you about the Council of Chief State School Officers and to explain the evolution and creation of the Common Core State Standards.

To begin, I wanted to take a brief moment to introduce myself and tell you about the organization I am honored to lead, CCSSO. I am the executive director of the CCSSO. Prior to serving as executive director I was the director of membership and also led our standards, assessment and accountability work during the development and widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards. CCSSO is a membership organization that was created by and for the public officials who lead elementary and secondary education agencies in the states. In Alaska, your member of CCSSO is Commissioner Mike Hanley. CCSSO brings together these state chiefs, provides guidance to and supports their work on education policy issues with the goal of improving public education across the United States. All of our work is guided by a commitment to preparing every student for success in college, career and beyond. Alaska is a member of CCSSO and Commissioner Hanley has worked with us during his tenure here and is a strong state leader.

In getting ready to participate in this hearing today, I thought it might be useful to briefly talk about the difference between standards and curriculum. Standards are the expectations or goals for students at different points in time during their education. Curricula are the lessons and specific tools that teachers create and use to help students reach the standards. For example, a standard in the Common Core for second grade mathematics asks students to, “Estimate lengths using units of inches, feet, centimeters and meters.” A teacher in Juneau might create a lesson asking students to estimate the length of moose footprints, a tree, and a river; another teacher in Anchorage might choose to teach the same standard, but ask students to estimate the length of a pencil, city bus, and a highway.

In English Language Arts a standard in second grade says: students will “describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.” It is up to a teacher to find the appropriate story for his or her students. It doesn’t state which story, again, those are local choices and states who are implementing the Common Core State Standards continue to have total authority over curriculum. Additionally, these standards provide the expectations for students, but educators make the decisions on how to help students reach these standards. This clarity is important as we enter into a discussion about standards.

Now, I would like to tell you a little more about how the states decided to develop a set of common standards. In November of 2007, we had our first conversation with the Chiefs at our annual policy meeting.

State leaders, including those in Alaska, were committed to setting clear and rigorous K-12 expectations for all students. At the same time, though, states were frustrated. Standards quality varied dramatically, and leaders had gone through several revisions of their own state standards at great cost in staff time, district and school engagement, and money. Every revision cycle, the standards got more voluminous and more complex and yet, no matter how leaders tried to use the best processes, they did not have access to the expertise needed to develop great standards. States looked around and every state was spending the same time and money independently to create their own state standards. States and many cities set unique standards leading to an inconsistent patchwork of learning expectations nationwide. It did not make sense to me, and I would say, it did not make sense to many parents and community members.

On a regular basis states were being criticized by advocacy groups and research institutions, noting the lack of quality in those standards and the lack of growth and achievement of our students. States were criticized for low graduation rates and for graduating students who were being remediated at high rates because they were not prepared for the rigor of college. The business sector reminded us we were not graduating students with the knowledge and skills aligned with the new demands of the workforce. As you know, it is disheartening to receive this constant criticism while working as hard as we can to improve educational opportunity for our children.

One telling criticism that is difficult to combat is how students perform on state assessments versus the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). There are often gaps in the level of expectations for students between NAEP and state tests. In Alaska, for example, in grade 4, 74.8% of students scored proficient on the Alaska state math test in 2011 and 75.4 % in ELA. That's in contrast to Alaska's NAEP scores that year, where 36% of students in math and 28% of students in reading performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level. Defending these disparities in expectations is hard to do as states.

Against that backdrop in 2007, state chiefs & governors decided to take action. These leaders started with a few questions: Is it possible for states to come together to develop a set of shared standards in math and English Language Arts? Could state leaders pool their collective talents and resources to develop a set of ELA and math standards that were clear, rigorous, and teachable? While doing so, can we correct many flaws in the system?

But more than that, could they seize this opportunity to go farther? Could states set the bar not just at graduation, but raise the bar to at a level that would assure students they would be prepared for continuing education and a meaningful career pathway? Could states make these standards not only higher, but clearer for teachers, parents and students and could we make them fewer and more focused, so they are teachable and learnable? Could states lay out learning progressions or an ascending staircase of expectations for increasing complexity as students grew in their learning? Were states willing to benchmark against the best countries in the world?

State education leaders found a partner in the governors who shared many of the same concerns. CCSSO and the National Governors Association decided to work together to develop a set of standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics designed to ensure that students graduate from high school prepared for college and career. Standards that states could choose to adopt. CCSSO and NGA did not ask states to commit to the standards, just to agree to engage in the in the process to develop the standards. Forty-eight states, including Alaska, agreed to participate in

developing the standards by signing a memorandum of agreement (MOA). There was nothing binding in the agreement, but rather it said that the state would take seriously the process to develop the standards in partnership with other states. This was only the development of standards, not the state's decision to adopt the standards.

How the Standards Were Developed

The standards were developed by states and for states. State representatives participated in working groups and provided feedback on the 5 drafts of the standards that led to the final standards. The development process began in partnership with state leaders, higher education, employers, and the best research available to determine what students need to be college and career ready. Standards were then developed for each grade level to prepare students to meet those expectations by graduation.

The process used to write the standards was designed to ensure that the standards were informed by:

- The best standards among states and around the globe;
- The experience of teachers, content experts, and states, and
- Several rounds of feedback from many including: educators, business leaders and the public.

Let me talk more about the Common Core being informed by the best standards among states. In the MOA states created and signed, they required that the document say that no state would have to lower their standards through adopting the Common Core. Massachusetts in particular—a state that is widely accepted to have had some of the highest academic standards in the nation—insisted on this language and underwent internal and external reviews to ensure that the rigor of the Massachusetts' standards was met and in places also increased. Let me be clear, the Common Core is first and foremost about excellence and a high bar for student achievement.

The standards development process also included an advisory group who provided guidance on the work. Members of this group included higher education and career readiness experts including ACT, the Business Roundtable, the College Board (group that develops the SAT), and the State Higher Education Executive Officers, and Achieve, as well as the National Association of State Boards of Education.

About the Common Core State Standards

As I said earlier, the states decided to develop standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade in English Language arts or ELA and mathematics.

The English Language Arts standards establish a —staircase of increasing complexity in what students must be able to read so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. The standards also require the progressive development of reading comprehension so that students advancing through the grades are able to gain more from whatever they read. To be clear, the ELA standards unambiguously focus on literature. The standards require literary study to be—and remain—the focus of literature class and they require important literary works be the centerpiece of literature.

The ELA standards also focus on informational texts. I'd like to highlight one point in particular about the standards that we heard forcefully from the business and higher education communities: that one of the biggest challenges they see in students entering higher education (whether community colleges or four year universities) is students' difficulty in reading complex texts. Students were having trouble even reading a technical manual for operating a piece of machinery. The standards recognize that literacy is the responsibility of all teachers, so social studies, science and career and technical education (CTE) teachers are expected to also prepare their students to read and write within their disciplines. The standards, however emphasize balance between literature and informational texts. English teachers should continue to teach rich, engaging, foundational literature that creates a love of reading in students—*Macbeth*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*. In order to succeed in work and life, students must be strong readers of literature and informational texts.

Through reading a diverse array of classic and contemporary literature as well as challenging informational texts in a range of subjects, students are expected to build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspectives. Because the standards are building blocks for successful classrooms – but recognize that teachers, school districts, and states need to decide on appropriate curriculum – they intentionally do not offer a required reading list. Instead, they offer numerous sample texts to help teachers prepare for the school year and allow parents and students to know what to expect at the beginning of the year.

The Mathematics standards stress not only procedural skills, but also conceptual understanding to make sure students are learning and absorbing the critical information they need to succeed at higher levels. The K-5 standards provide students with a solid foundation in whole numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals, which help young students build the foundation to successfully apply more demanding math concepts and procedures, and move into practical applications of those core math principles. Having built a strong K-5 foundation, students can do hands-on learning in geometry, algebra, and probability and statistics once they reach the middle school level. Students who have completed grade 7 and mastered its content and skills will be well-prepared for algebra in grade 8. The middle school standards are robust and provide a coherent and rich preparation for high school mathematics. The high school standards call on students to practice applying mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges; they prepare students to think and reason mathematically.

More than 100 educators and content experts from across the nation were integral participants in the development process – as part of the work teams and feedback groups for the Common Core. Additionally, hundreds of state team participants from across the 48 states participated in the development of the standards. Another part of the development process was two public comment periods, where we received over 10,000 public comments that helped inform the final standards. The final standards were released in June 2010 and have since been adopted by 46 states, D.C., and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA). States that didn't adopt the standards, Virginia, Texas, Alaska and Nebraska, have upgraded their standards to match the higher demand for our students.

Some of the biggest proponents of the standards have been the business community, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, and the U.S. military since they

see many students exiting high school ill-prepared for the demands of work and the modern military.

Teachers from across the nation – by a wide margin – believe that the CCSS will improve the quality of instruction. To note a recent example, in the latest nationwide *Scholastic* poll of teachers, there was near universal knowledge of the CCSS; and 77 percent of a sample size of 20,000 believed the CCSS will improve students’ ability to think critically and use reasoning skills. Another survey found that 7 out of 10 teachers are confident the Common Core will better prepare students for college and the workforce.

Local Decision-Making on Implementation

These standards were developed by the states for the states. The federal government played no role whatsoever in the development of the Common Core State Standards. There has been much discussion about the federal government incentivizing states to adopt the Common Core. The federal government did not write these standards, they weren’t involved at all in the creation of the standards. They did encourage states to use the standards by awarding a small number of points for those using a “common set of standards” in the Race to the Top grant application. It was a small incentive to states to adopt the standards. However, no state is required by anything in federal law to use the Common Core. And in fact, Alaska never applied for Race to the Top funds. Ultimately, it should be and is a choice for Alaska about what standards are best for Alaska’s students – Alaskans deciding what skills and knowledge students need in Alaska.

Implementation of the standards looks different in each state based on the history and context of that state. CCSSO and NGA vigorously oppose any federal involvement in implementation of the Common Core. Federal guidance to states seeking certain grant funding or waivers under the No Child Left Behind Act refers to “college and career ready” standards rather than a specific set of standards or the Common Core State Standards. The federal government has no ability or right to dictate what a state’s standards should be.

The standards establish *what* students need to learn, but do not tell teachers *how* to teach. States and districts continue to determine the curriculum and methodologies that will ensure that teachers are supported in helping students reach these standards. And teachers will continue to create lesson plans and tailor instruction to the unique needs of the students in their classroom.

Standards by themselves cannot raise achievement. Standards don’t stay up late at night working on lesson plans, or stay after school making sure every student learns—it is teachers who do that. And standards don’t implement themselves. Education leaders from the state board of education to the building principal and classroom teachers must make the standards a reality in schools. You should be proud of the support that your state has provided to educators to transition to the Alaska Standards.

In fact, while Alaska was working on their standards, they asked CCSSO for feedback on their standards. We were able to help Alaska with that process, and in our findings we were able to point out the strength of the Alaska standards and the process that Alaska has gone through to strengthen their standards. Commissioner Hanley will give more detail on this- but I’d like to

emphasize that Alaska has written excellent standards that will put your students on track to college and career readiness.

State Ownership

One final note on the standards, let me assure you, there are no standards police. States are in full control of their own standards and each state used their own process to adopt the Common Core and as I said earlier, they are all implementing the standards based on their own timeline and local needs. When the Common Core was released states were able to add to the standards as they wish and they continue to be able to take this action. There is no binding commitment the states have made with CCSSO, NGA or anyone else regarding adoption of the Common Core. The choice is completely in the hands of states, as is laid out in state law.

That being said, there are advantages of the standards being common – including being able to use instructional materials and assessments developed in other states and being able to achieve economies of scale by collaborating with other states on implementation of the Common Core.

Summary

To conclude, I just want to stress that the reason that state leaders, large majorities of educators, the military, the business community, higher education and many, many others have united around the Common Core State Standards is because we all share the belief that these expectations have the potential to change the face of education today. It is not a silver bullet but I believe that these standards and the many other efforts states are leading today will have a deep impact on student learning.

The Common Core is already showing signs of student success. Kentucky became the first state to start using the Common Core State Standards in 2010. Prior to that, only 34 percent of the students who graduated from Kentucky high schools were ready to go on to college or start a career. After just a single year of using the Common Core, that number jumped up to 47 percent. A year later it hit 54 percent. Those aren't just statistics. Those are real students - students who no longer have to pay college tuition for remedial classes when they enroll.

Leaders in Tennessee have provided intensive training for more than 40,000 educators in the Common Core. These trainings were responsive in real-time to teacher feedback by receiving a steady stream of input during the conference to be sure that adjustments could be made. Here again, we are already seeing student performance rise --- on the latest nation's report card (the National Assessment for Educational Progress, NAEP) Tennessee students made huge gains in all four areas assessed.

In June 2012, the State Board in Alaska adopted new, higher standards that are built for Alaska. The Alaska Department of Education has an effective plan they have been putting in place to roll those standards out, and you will learn more about that from Commissioner Hanley. As you heard from me earlier, the important change that must be made across the nation is the raising of expectations for all students, and that is what Alaska is doing.