

Common Core and the Alaska State Standards

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My name is Kathleen Porter-Magee; I'm a Bernard Lee Schwartz policy fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning education policy think tank in Washington, DC that also leads ground-level work in the great state of Ohio.

I'm honored to be with you here today, and am grateful for the opportunity to talk to you about the quality, content and rigor of both the Common Core State Standards as well as the previous Alaska standards for English Language arts and math. I hope to help explain why the Common Core are clearer and more rigorous than the vast majority of standards they've replaced—and why they are superior than the K-12 ELA and math standards that were in place in Alaska prior to 2012.

For nearly two decades, state standards have been a cornerstone of our modern education system. State governments have long set minimum expectations for each grade level or grade band across all grades, K through 12. These are meant to ensure that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status are held to the same rigorous standards. And there is ample evidence that, without clear objectives, teachers will—often unconsciously—raise or lower their own expectations based on the abilities and background of the students in front of them, rather than based on what will help ensure students are on path towards college or the workforce.

Yet, we have known for a long time that, in far too many states, including Alaska, the existing state standards set the bar far too low, leaving a content and expectations gap between schools and classrooms.

But are the Common Core the right solution to this problem? In order to answer that question, it's important to understand five facts:

1. The Common Core effort is and has always been a state-led effort to improve the quality and rigor of K-12 academic standards, of which Alaska leaders were initially full participants, and which is why Alaska was able to opt out of the CCSS without penalty.
2. The Common Core State Standards are significantly stronger than the Alaska standards that were in place prior to 2012.
3. Common Core English standards emphasize the importance of reading rigorous, high-quality literature in English class, plus non-fiction in history, science, and other courses.
4. The Common Core math standards prioritize the most important math content at each grade level, including a heavy dose of “math facts” and arithmetic in the early grades.
5. Whether Alaska chooses to adopt or adapt the Common Core or not, educators will retain full control over curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy where it belongs—at the local level.

Let's dive deeper into rigor of the standards. If I leave you with nothing else, I hope I am successful in underlining this critical point: the Common Core are significantly clearer and more rigorous than the Alaska ELA and math standards that were in place prior to 2012.

We at the Fordham Institute have been evaluating state standards for more than 15 years. In 2010, we released a comprehensive review of the clarity and specificity and content and rigor of every state's existing ELA 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 ELA experts and an A-minus from our math experts. In the same evaluation, Alaska's English language arts and math standards earned an F and a D, respectively.

Even still, when the final version of the Common Core State Standards was released in 2010, the standards were not meant to serve as the totality of a state’s standards but instead to define the “core”—the essential ELA and math knowledge and skills that students need to be college and career ready.

As leaders of the Common Core State Standards Initiative made clear at the time, states were encouraged not only to adopt the CCSS, but also to customize the standards to their state’s unique needs by adding state-specific features that build upon this Core. Several states have done precisely that. In Massachusetts, for instance, the State Board of Education asked a committee of educators—including English teachers and university professors—to review the Common Core and compare them to the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework. That committee unanimously recommended Common Core adoption because its members felt that the Common Core “is unequivocal in its insistence upon academic rigor and high expectations for all students K-12.”¹

But their support came with some recommendations. They did not, for instance, want to lose Massachusetts’s strong standards for pre-Kindergarten, nor did they want to lose the guidance that was found in the state’s list of exemplar texts. To address those concerns, the State Board of Education voted (also unanimously) to adopt the Common Core, but with several strategic additions. The Board added the Massachusetts pre-K standards; they added specific standards, including several that included important genre-specific content; and they included their own list of exemplar texts. That means that, today, the Massachusetts Common Core standards look different than those that guide teaching and learning in other states. It also means that Massachusetts did not simply replace its previous, strong standards with something less rigorous. It took the best of both and created something even stronger that kept them, in the words of Commissioner Mitchell Chester, “right where [they] should be—at the table with other states to collaborate on innovative curricular and instructional strategies that will benefit students and educators for years to come.”²

Finally, there are benefits from the “commonness” of the Common Core that should be acknowledged. Teachers in Common Core states have access to a far greater number of curricular and instructional resources—many of them free—than states in non-Common Core states. Indeed, because publishers, both large and small, have access to a larger market for Common Core-aligned materials, the possibility of innovation is far greater. Whereas in the past, Indiana educators were subject to the whims of a smaller number of textbook creators who were able to define quality and control the market, in the Common Core era, their monopoly has been challenged. And the result is teacher access to a far greater number of resources that can meet the needs of a more diverse set of learners. In addition, Indiana has the opportunity to collaborate with other states on assessment development and professional development in a way not possible for states who have not adopted the Common Core.

Of course, the benefits of the “commonness” of the Common Core are less important than the quality of the standards themselves. But on this point, let me be clear: The Common Core are among the clearest, most rigorous standards of any K-12 English language arts standards in the nation or the English-speaking world. By choosing to leverage the Common Core and add to them the best of Alaska’s previous standards, you have the opportunity to create a set of standards that would rival the best in the world. That is a goal worth shooting for and something that would position Alaska students where they need to be in terms of national and international competitiveness.

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¹ Report of the English Language Arts Review Panel, on the Common Core and Massachusetts Standards, July 2010; http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/0710/item1_elapanel.pdf

² Education Board adopts Common Core standards to keep Massachusetts students national leaders in education, July 21, 2010; <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=5634>

analysis, the Common Core earned a B-plus from our ELA experts and an A-minus from our math experts. Even Sandra Stotsky, one of Common Core's fiercest critics, has acknowledged that, for most states, going backwards makes little sense. "States are unlikely to want to return to the standards they once had," because they they would be rightly accused of returning to "non-rigorous" standards.³

When judged against international standards for ELA, the Common Core fares well. Between 2009 and 2010, we reviewed the quality of the standards that provide the foundation for several national and international assessments: the NAEP, the PISA, and PIRLS. In these comparisons, the Common Core outperformed all three. In short, these standards are not just internationally competitive, they are among the best in the world.

In spite of this evidence of rigor of the Common Core, critics have spread countless myths about what the standards ask, who is behind them, and what they mean for our teachers and students. For the purposes of today's conversation, let me address four of the most prominent critiques to demonstrate how these attacks don't hold up under scrutiny.

First, many critics mistakenly believe that the Common Core inappropriately prioritize nonfiction over literature in language arts classrooms. This argument rests on two dubious assumptions or misrepresentations. First, many have either misread—or deliberately misrepresent—a two-paragraph section that appears on page 5 of the introduction to the Common Core. That introduction suggests that teachers 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 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 ELA settings. Teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts." What high school seniors read in history and science class would count, too.

That means that the *only* place where the Common Core explicitly mentions the amount of time teachers should spend on literary versus nonliterary reading is to clarify that literary study should dominate text selection in literature classrooms. Any contention that the standards say otherwise is patently false.

Dr. Stotsky, in particular, has also frequently claimed that the number of standards devoted to informational or literary study should be used to guide the percentage of time teachers should spend on each. (There are roughly the same number of reading standards for literary and informational texts and, because of that, Stotsky claims that the Common Core requires teachers to spend exactly the same proportion of their time reading literary and informational text.) No such requirement exists. Again, the *only* explicit reference to the amount of time teachers should spend teaching literature and literary nonfiction is to clarify the Common Core's emphasis on literary study.

To be clear, though, the Common Core does ask for an increase in the amount of time and attention devoted to informational texts and literary nonfiction, both in literature class and in science and social studies. But this is merely a correction to the distressingly *small* percentage of time currently devoted to reading the appropriately complex, content-rich informational texts that students need to build vocabulary and deepen comprehension. This is especially important in the elementary grades where students have almost no access to rigorous and interesting informational texts. In fact, research has suggested that as few as 10 percent of books in lower-elementary classroom libraries are informational, and that first graders spent as little as 3.6 minutes each day

³ "What to do once Common Core is halted," Dr. Sandra Stotsky, June 20, 20103, <http://pioneerinstitute.org/blog/what-to-do-once-common-core-is-halted-by-sandra-stotsky/>

interacting with informational text. That puts them behind their international peers and doesn't equip them with the skills they need to succeed in a 21st century information economy.⁴ Yet reading informational texts, particularly in the early grades, is a well-documented way to increase academic and domain-specific vocabulary, two necessary elements of reading comprehension. This is precisely why education leaders like E.D. Hirsch are supportive of the Common Core—because the standards, if faithfully implemented, have the potential to bring content and rigor back to the curriculum.

But the fear that informational texts will somehow supplant literary study in Common Core classrooms, rather than supplement it, is unfounded. The standards devote two entire appendices to helping to clarify text complexity and to outlining “exemplar” texts that meet the standards’ complexity requirements. And those exemplar texts address a variety of genres, and they include a heavy dose of exactly the kind of fiction and literary nonfiction that some of the fiercest Common Core critics have repeatedly argued for. In fact, the vast majority of texts included in Appendix B are works written by literary giants like Thoreau, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Harper Lee, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The small number of advanced technical documents included in these lists, while important, are dwarfed by the volume of great authors and works of literature and literary nonfiction that the Common Core holds up as exemplary.

In other words, while some pretend that the Common Core will lead to the end of great literature, the reality is that, for the past several decades, we’ve seen erosion in the quality and complexity of texts being assigned in schools. This dumbing down of the curriculum comes at a time when our students need rigorous preparation the most. The Common Core seeks to right that wrong by refocusing our attention on reading texts that are worth reading, and doing the kind of higher-order literary analysis that will prepare students for college-level work.

A **second** common myth is 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—and allow the time and space needed for deep mastery of that 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.

Third, some critics complain that the Common Core 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.

Finally, some argue that adoption of the Common Core—or any K-12 academic standards—will usurp local control over curriculum and instruction. On the contrary, by setting standards, rather than adopting statewide curricula, state education leaders are ensuring that local district, school, and teacher leaders remain in control of the decisions that most directly impact the students they serve. On the ELA side, this means that local leaders and teachers can and will choose the texts students will read. It means that parents, teachers, and leaders still need to work together to define the “content-rich curriculum” their children should be learning.

⁴ Duke, N. K. (2000). 3.6 minutes per day: The scarcity of informational texts in first grade. *Reading Research Quarterly*

Standards set a minimum bar—a floor, not a ceiling. They are designed only to help define student outcomes to help ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn the content they need to succeed. But educators still drive curriculum and instruction. Leaders still make critical, school-level decisions.

In the end, Common Core is a classroom-level reform. It is meant to refocus planning, curriculum, and instruction on the things that matter most to reading comprehension: books that are worth reading; content that is worth learning; and reading and writing that is tied directly to both. Whether the promise of the Common Core is realized depends on whether leaders are able to look past the politics into the classroom and make decisions that are in the best interest of the students we all hope to serve.