

**Testimony to the Common Core Task Force – State of Arkansas**  
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I'd like to thank the Government of the State of Arkansas for forming this Task Force and inviting Heartland and others to testify. Briefly, the Heartland Institute is a Chicago-based think tank whose mission is to discover, develop, and promote free-market solutions to America's social and economic problems. I am the senior fellow on education issues for Heartland.

It is the position of the Heartland Institute that the CCSS framework is, at best, another expensive bureaucratic exercise in reshuffling the deck chairs on America's education "*Titanic*," At worst, the CCSS threatens to dramatically undermine educational diversity, dynamism, and self-determination. To illustrate, let me run very quickly through a few bright spots that show great promise.

**Khan Academy**

If you haven't heard of him already, Salman Khan is the computer programmer who turned a 10 minute YouTube video intended to tutor his niece into a wide and deep set of over 3000 10 minute videos. These videos now cover everything from one plus one through quantum mechanics.

While his nonprofit has raised millions of dollars, the services that he has provided to all Americans has not cost taxpayers a single dime.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/mission/math>

**Carpe Diem Charter**

Carpe Diem Charter School is located in Yuma Arizona. It is setup like an office, with cubicles in the center of a wide open space, and classrooms surrounding the open space.

Students start the day sitting down at workstations and work through reading, English, math, and science, using special software that rapidly takes them through content. The students are continuously prompted to show what they have learned, and if they make a mistake, the software goes back to find their weak link. It then focuses on that link until the child understands. For children who get stuck, the computer alerts proctors, who then assist the student.

When the students break for a small class with a teacher, they do not share the room with students there age, but with students who are at the same point of content comprehension. The teacher is able to provide enrichment, without having to go through some of the nuts and bolts that the software conveys more effectively.

The school is very successful, as children of every level learn at a faster pace than the "seat time" model of the legacy "brick and mortar" system.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s\\_O65rWV10](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s_O65rWV10)

### **Ethiopian village**

A few years ago, a nonprofit went to an Ethiopian Village that barely had running water or electricity. It had no school, no building, and no teachers. This organization dropped off hardwired the tablet computers that would not connect to the Internet, but were loaded with some educational software.

The only instructions that was given to the adults in the village was how to recharge that else. They cannot leave instructions regarding the operation of the tablets.

When they came back three months later every child in the village had learned to read or was well underway for doing so.

<http://www.technologyreview.com/news/506466/given-tablets-but-no-teachers-ethiopian-children-teach-themselves/>

### **Researchers Toy**

In 2009, scientists from the University of Louisville and MIT's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences conducted a study of 48 children between the ages of 3 and 6. The kids were presented with a toy that could squeak, play notes, and reflect images, among other things. For one set of children, a researcher demonstrated a single attribute and then let them play with the toy. Another set of students was given no information about the toy. This group played longer and discovered an average of six attributes of the toy; the group that was told what to do discovered only about four. A similar study at UC Berkeley demonstrated that kids given no instruction were much more likely to come up with novel solutions to a problem. "The science is brand-new, but it's not as if people didn't have this intuition before," says coauthor Alison Gopnik, a professor of psychology at UC Berkeley.

<http://www.wired.com/business/2013/10/free-thinkers/>

### **Centralization has failed while decentralization is succeeding**

All of the above success stories have one thing in common. They are completely independent organizations discovering innovative ways to convey content. Common Core does the opposite, doubling down on the least effective strategy in American education policy - centralization. This drive for centralization has an unbroken record of failure, as cost soar while outcomes remain flat.

At a time where technology is unleashing a dramatic reduction in the cost of learning, why should America embark on a long, expensive, an likely counterproductive detour? America's children might suffer immeasurably, and the taxpayers will once again have wasted billions of dollars attempting to execute a poorly thought-out mistake. Arkansas is to be commended if it puts the brakes on this endeavor.

## **Some points about the Common Core**

- Point 1: Common Core is of mediocre academic quality, according to nationally known experts, and research shows education standards do not improve student achievement.
- Point 2: Common Core was not created by states in any meaningful sense. It was written behind closed doors by unelected committees inside organizations funded largely by the federal government.
- Point 3: Most states have agreed to subject their laws to federally funded and monitored Common Core testing groups, largely through contracts legislatures have not reviewed.
- Point 4: Many states promised the federal government they would trade their standards for Common Core before a draft or final version of the standards was published. This amounts to educational malpractice for legislators who say they have their constituents best interests at heart. How could they know?
- Point 5: The national Common Core testing groups have not specified what data they will require of states within their student assessments, but they have promised the federal government will receive full access. The Obama administration has removed federal protections that in the past limited student data-sharing and required schools to inform parents of it.
- Point 6: Common Core threatens educational diversity by creating a national market for education in which all tests—including the SAT, ACT, Iowa Basic, and Stanford 10—and most curricula are structured according to one system. Given the stories I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, this, again, amounts to educational malpractice.
- Point 7: Common Core is entirely experimental. No state or school has ever tested it.
- Point 8: Education standards are not curriculum, but they determine what children will and will not learn. They define curriculum. Bill Gates, a funder of the CC effort, while discussing test alignment, stated, “When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well.”
- Point 9: Almost no state has analyzed how much retraining teachers, new curriculum, and upgrading technology by 2016 for online-only Common Core tests will cost taxpayers.
- Point 10: There is no process for parents, teachers, and school boards to provide feedback or gain flexibility on all or part of Common Core as students begin encountering it.
- Point 11: Common Core assumes one schedule of learning fits all children, and a small group of paid experts know what it is. It also rests on the premise, rejected by many communities and parents, that the sole purpose of public education is workforce training.

## **Is a National Standard necessary?**

While a national standard might make sense for smaller nations, there is no real evidence they are necessary for a nation's educational success. Furthermore, national standards will prove to very unwieldy for a nation as large and diverse as the USA.

Jay P. Greene, Head of the Department of Education Reform at University of Arkansas, outlines three problems with the mindset behind centralization.

“First, nationalized approaches lack a mechanism for continual improvement. Given how difficult it is to agree upon them, once we set national standards, curriculum, and assessments, they are nearly impossible to change. If we discover a mistake or wish to try a new and possibly better approach, we can't switch. We are stuck with whatever national choices we make for a very long time. And if we make a mistake we will impose it on the entire country.

Second, to the extent that there will be change in a nationalized system of standards, curriculum, and assessments, it will be directed by the most powerful organized interests in education, and probably not by reformers. Making standards more rigorous and setting cut scores on assessments higher would show the education system in a more negative light, so teachers unions and other organized interests in education may attempt to steer the nationalized system in a less rigorous direction.

Third, we are a large and diverse country. Teaching everyone the same material at the same time and in the same way may work in small homogenous countries, like Finland, but it cannot work in the United States. There is no single best way that would be appropriate for all students in all circumstances.

- See more at: <http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/jay-p-greene-to-us-house-common-core-will-stifle-reforms/#sthash.ZgioDE7M.dpuf>

## **What are the alternatives to the Common Core?**

If Common Core is the wrong strategy, what are the alternatives? This is a particularly tough question for states that have already invested taxpayer dollars moving to CCSS.

First, while there might be some benefit to developing a standard, there is little benefit to attempting to “align” tests to the standards. While this sounds strange, given the attention to testing, it makes perfect sense.

If we want to measure how well new standards work, the best method to measure them is to see how well students do on tests independent of any “alignment.” After all, if a new standard is effective, then test scores of already existing tests (ACT, NAEP, SAT) should suffice to indicate their efficacy.

Aligning tests to the new standards therefore, is merely self-referential. The best course forward therefore, is to rely on tests that are independent of Common Core standards. We propose that states, and anyone interested in academic performance levels of students in K-12 education use ACT standards and tests. At last week's hearings, this alternative was discussed as a possibility. We support that as an alternative to the PARCC testing regime.

Asora Education Enterprises recently compared some ACT tests with those of NAEP. At the 8th, 10th, and 12th grade levels, Asora found the primary NAEP figure of merit, the proficiency percentage, is numerically close to ACT's figure of merit, the percent on track to be college- and career-ready. A recent Asora report elaborates on this analysis.

Several states already are using ACT tests as a primary assessment mechanism and would find it rather easy to transition from PARCC. ACT content standards are more traditional, research-based, and supportive of college readiness than Common Core, which has not been validated by significant peer-reviewed research.

### **Keep Curriculum Independent of Standards**

The greatest potential danger regarding the Common Core is not the standards or the tests, but the narrowing of curriculum. While CCSS supporters bend over backwards to insist that the Common Core is not a curriculum, its implementation says otherwise.

In the ELA portion of the Common Core, shifting from fiction to non-fiction is a curriculum change, not a change in a standard. In math, the reports of parents from across the nation, lamenting their inability to assist their children, indicates a change in curriculum, not a mere standard.

None of this should be viewed as a surprise. Bill Gates, perhaps one greatest driving forces behind adoption of the Common Core, when speaking at a 2009 NCSL conference stated openly that "When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well."

This is the most important issue regarding implementation of the Common Core. Developing a standard and then testing to see whether they are working are generally reasonable ideas, even if they are difficult to implement in a nation with the size and complexity of the US. However, imposing "one-size-fits-all" curriculum on 52 million of the most economically ethnically, and culturally diverse children in the world is simply one of the worst ideas imaginable. It also happens to be illegal.

Three federal statutes prohibit federal control of curricula and restate what the Constitution already implies:

- The General Education Provisions Act prohibits federal government control of curricula used by "any educational institution."<sup>18</sup>
- The Department of Education Organization Act denies any officer of the Department of Education authority for the "exercise and direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum" of "any educational institution, school," unless a specific federal law authorizes it.<sup>19</sup>
- The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 limits federal control over curriculum in schools.

As this Task Force considers what is in the best interests of Arkansas' citizens and students, no item is more important than guaranteeing curricular independence of the school and the teacher, subject to the oversight by the parents.

Impose a standard if you must, but the more that standard impacts the classroom, the more it is a curriculum, not a standard. For this reason, legislation that a) guarantees independent curriculum, and b) makes that curriculum transparent and accessible to the public, are important firewalls that blunt any negative impact of Common Core.

Proponents of the Common Core insist that "it is only a standard." In essence, they are saying "if you like your curriculum, you can keep your curriculum." We have heard that before. Every state, regardless of what standard or test they choose, should insist on freedom and transparency of curriculum.

### **In closing, a better vision**

I'd like to go back to those stories that I told at the beginning of my presentation. If a tablet loaded only with software can teach children to read without a school building or trained instructors, why should the state of Arkansas engage in an expensive "reform" of their schools?

If a single school in Arizona can dramatically accelerate children's learning without a centralized testing mandate, and if Khan Academy can essentially produce a soup-to-nuts kindergarten through college curriculum – complete with continuous assessment – at no taxpayer expense, then why are we wasting valuable resources implementing yet another attempt to make centralization work?

Most of all, if a toy can illustrate the negative effects of focusing curriculum on a narrow set of subject matter, why are we even debating imposing such a bad idea on Arkansas' children?

There is a better vision.

Imagine a world where every parent could enroll their child in an online portfolio that they owned and have control over. Imagine that this portfolio could contain writing samples, videos of the child demonstrating content mastery, along with the necessary quizzes and tests that assist teachers, professors, and employers in understanding that person's capability.

Imagine that Arkansas children have access to numerous teachers, tutors and mentors who have unique and interesting ways of teaching. Imagine that these teachers are assisted by sophisticated software that removes the drudgery of learning while still installing the necessary automaticity of language and mathematical skill.

Imagine that all this is financed by education savings accounts that allow parents to shop not for a zip code with a slightly better-performing bureaucracy, but for the specific learning provider that best suits their child.

I submit to you that this vision is much better than the never ending war between expensive, top-down bureaucrats, and over-regulated citizens forced to pay for them.