

# Why Common Core's English Language Arts Standards Need Total Revision

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**Overview:** I first describe my qualifications, the lack of qualifications of Common Core's standards writers, and the membership of Common Core's Validation Committee, on which I served. I then comment on Common Core's ELA standards.

**I. My Qualifications:** I am professor *emerita* at the University of Arkansas, where I held the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Chair in Teacher Quality until my retirement in 2012. I served as Senior Associate Commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education from 1999-2003, where I was in charge of developing or revising all the state's K-12 standards, teacher licensure tests, and teacher and administrator licensure regulations. I served on the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education from 2006-2010, on the National Mathematics Advisory Panel from 2006-2008, and on the Common Core Validation Committee from 2009-2010. I was one of the five members of the Validation Committee who did not sign off on the standards as being rigorous, internationally competitive, or research-based.

I was also editor of the premier research journal, *Research in the Teaching of English*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, from 1991 to 1997. I have published extensively in professional journals and written several books. In recent years, I have testified before many state legislative committees and boards on the flaws in Common Core's standards and on the features of the academically rigorous English language arts standards that I developed for K-12 students and teachers in Massachusetts and that contributed to academic gains in all students.

## II. Lack of Relevant Qualifications in Common Core's Standards Writers

Common Core's K-12 standards were developed by three private organizations in Washington, DC and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In the absence of official information from the National Governors Association, the Council for Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., it seems likely that Achieve, Inc. and the Gates Foundation selected most of the key personnel to write the college-readiness standards. Almost all the members of the Standards Development Work Groups that developed the high school-level standards were on the staff of Achieve, Inc. and three other test/curriculum development companies—American College Testing (ACT), America's Choice (a for-profit project of the National Center on Education and the Economy, also known as NCEE), and the College Board (CB). This crucial committee did not include any high school mathematics or English teachers, reading researchers, or literary scholars.

The absence of relevant professional credentials in the two standards-writing teams helps to explain the flaws in Common Core's standards. The "lead" writers for the ELA standards, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, had never taught reading or English in K-12 or at the college level. Neither has a doctorate in English. Neither has ever published serious work on K-12 curriculum and instruction. Neither has a reputation for literary scholarship or research in education. At the time they were appointed, they were virtually unknown to English and reading educators.

The three lead standards writers in mathematics were as unknown to K-12 educators as were the ELA standards writers. None of the three standards writers in mathematics had ever developed K-12 mathematics standards that had been used—or used effectively. The only member of this three-person team with K-12 teaching experience (consisting of two years teaching mathematics at the middle school level) had majored in English as an undergraduate (Phil Daro).

Who recommended these people as standards writers and why, we still do not know. No one in the media commented on their lack of credentials for the task they had been assigned. Indeed, no one in the media showed the slightest interest in the qualifications of the standards writers. Nor did the media comment on the low level of college readiness they worked out for high school.

### **III. Lack of Academic Qualifications in Most Members of the Validation Committee**

The federal government did not fund an independent group of experts to evaluate the rigor of the standards, even though it expected the states to adopt them. Instead, the private organizations in charge of the project created their own Validation Committee (VC) in 2009. The VC contained almost no academic experts in any area; most were education professors or associated with testing companies, from here and abroad. There was only one mathematician on the VC—R. James Milgram—although there were many people with graduate degrees in mathematics education or with appointments in an education school, and/or who worked chiefly in teacher education. I was the only nationally recognized expert on English language arts standards by virtue of my work in Massachusetts and for Achieve, Inc.’s high school exit standards in its American Diploma Project.

Professor Milgram and I did not sign off on the standards because they were not internationally competitive (benchmarked), rigorous, or research-based. Despite our repeated requests, we did not get the names of high-achieving countries whose standards could be compared with Common Core’s standards. (We received no “cross-walks.”) Nor did the standards writers offer any research evidence or rationale to defend their omission of the mathematics standards needed for STEM careers, their emphasis on writing not reading, their experimental approach to teaching Euclidean geometry, their deferral of the completion of Algebra I to grade 9 or 10, or their claim that informational reading instruction in the English class leads to college readiness. They also did not offer evidence that Common Core’s standards meet entrance requirements for *most colleges and universities* in this country or elsewhere.

### **IV. Flaws in Common Core’s ELA Standards**

**A. Most ELA standards are content-free skills, not “content” standards.** They do not address specific literary knowledge, specific literary history, or specific reading levels. They do not require students to read high school-level texts in high school. They do not prepare students for college work, a career, or active citizenship in an English-speaking country.

#### ***Examples of Common Core literature standards in grades 11/12:***

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

#### ***Examples of authentic ELA literature standards***

\*In California’s pre-2010 standards for 11/12:

- 3.7 Analyze recognized works of world literature from a variety of authors:
  - a. Contrast the major literary forms, techniques, and characteristics of the major literary

periods (e.g., Homeric Greece, medieval, romantic, neoclassic, modern).

b. Relate literary works and authors to the major themes and issues of their eras.

\*In Massachusetts' pre-2010 standards for grades 9/10:

16.11: Analyze the characters, structure, and themes of classical Greek drama and epic poetry.

***B. Common Core expects English teachers to spend at least half of their reading instructional time at every grade level on informational texts.*** Common Core lists about an equal number of reading standards for informational texts as for literary texts at every grade level, thus reducing literary study in the English class to about 50%. There is no research that supports a decrease in complex literature and an increase in informational texts in the English class as a way to improve college readiness.

***C. Common Core reduces opportunities for students to develop analytical thinking.*** Analytical thinking is developed in the English class when teachers teach students how to read between the lines of complex literary works. As noted in a 2006 ACT report titled *Reading Between the Lines*: “complexity is laden with literary features.” According to ACT, it involves “literary devices,” “tone,” “ambiguity,” “elaborate” structure, “intricate language,” and unclear intentions. Thus, reducing literary study in the English class in order to increase informational reading, in effect, retards college readiness.

***D. Common Core Offers Extremely Weak Vocabulary Standards*** Vocabulary knowledge is the key to reading comprehension, as 100 years of reading research have shown. Yet, the standards on vocabulary acquisition are among the weakest standards in ELA, relying heavily on the use of context.

***E. Common Core omits significant literary/historical content.*** There is no standard on the history of the English language, no standard on British literature/authors (not even Shakespeare), and no standard on authors from the ancient world, especially classical Greece and Rome.

## **V. What Common Core-Based ELA Standards and Tests Cannot Do**

### ***A. They Cannot Improve the Education of Low-Achieving, Low-Income Students***

1. There is no evidence from research or common sense to support their novel features.
2. They are not designed at the secondary level to strengthen the school curriculum
3. They do not provide the secondary curriculum choices offered students in advanced countries.

### ***B. They Cannot Address our Seminal Political Documents***

1. Students are not prepared to read them in historical context because their English teachers have been advised to do a “cold” reading of them.
2. Students are not prepared to understand their vocabulary because of Common Core’s weak vocabulary standards and lack of requirements for pre-1970 literary and non-literary texts.

***C. They Cannot Compel Students to Take Them.*** Parents have a right to opt their children out of federal- or state-mandated tests. According to one state’s department of education, “We expect all students to participate in state assessments, but no law requires participation.”...

***D. They Cannot Entail Penalties Unless Approved by a State Legislature.*** As explained by one state’s department of education, “Students who opt out of participation on state assessments will be counted as a non-participant when we calculate participation rates, but the nonparticipating students will not receive a score of ‘0’ when we calculate the percent of students who attained proficiency.”... “Opting out of participation in state assessments, under current state laws and

regulations, will not affect a student's placement, grade retention, or receipt of special services, nor will opting out affect a teacher's evaluation."

## **VI. Recommendations**

- 1. Request the state legislature to require development of rigorous, internationally benchmarked standards at the secondary level.** For an interim period, adopt the highest-rated pre-Common Core ELA standards in the country, such as California's, Indiana's 2006, Massachusetts 2001, or Texas 2008. These standards will be cheaper and easier for teachers to use than Common Core's. I have also provided free of charge a set of non-copyrighted ELA standards, dated 2013, based on the Massachusetts 2001 ELA standards.
- 2. Request the state legislature to require two different types of high school diplomas.** Not all high school students want to go to college or can do the reading and writing required in authentic college coursework. Many have other talents and interests and should be provided with the opportunity to choose a meaningful four-year high school curriculum that is not college-oriented, as do students in most other countries.
- 3. Request the state legislature to require the development of entrance exams (matriculation tests) for the state's institutions of higher education by the state's own engineering, science, and mathematics faculty and literary/humanities scholars.** Ask these faculty members to collaborate with mathematics and science teachers in the state's high schools in designing syllabi for advanced mathematics and science courses in the state's high schools. Why should officials in Washington DC decide admission standards for Nevada's own institutions?
- 4. Request the state legislature to restructure teacher and administrator training programs in state institutions of higher education.** The only finding from research on teacher effectiveness is that effective teachers know the subject matter they teach. The first step in raising student achievement in this country is raising the academic bar for every prospective teacher and administrator admitted to an educator training program in an education school. This could be accomplished by following the suggestions in my latest book and by adopting the teacher licensure tests I developed in Massachusetts, available at relatively no cost to the state.

## **References**

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