

Jay P. Greene's Testimony to the Arkansas Common Core Council

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Standards are about what we value. They communicate what we think is important for our children to learn, when they should learn it, and ultimately what kinds of adults we hope they will grow up to be.

Because standards are about values, their content is not merely a technical issue that can be determined by scientific methods. There is no technically correct set of standards, just as there is no technically correct political party or religion. Reasonable people have legitimate differences of opinion about what they want their children taught. A fundamental problem with national standards efforts, like Common Core, is that they are attempting to impose a single vision of a proper education on a large and diverse country with differing views.

National standards can try to produce uniformity out of diversity with some combination of two approaches. They can promote standards that are so bland and ambiguous as to be inoffensive to almost everyone. Or they can force their particular vision on those who believe differently. Either way, national standards, like Common Core, are inappropriate and likely to be ineffective. If national standards embrace a vague consensus, then they make no difference since almost everyone already believes them and is already working toward them. If, on the other hand, national standards attempt to impose their particular vision of a proper education on those with differing visions, then national standards are oppressive and likely to face high levels of resistance and non-compliance. So, national standards are doomed to be either unnecessary or illiberal. Either way, they are wrong.

Some of you may be thinking that education is not entirely about values. Can't we at least agree, you might be thinking, that all children need to acquire basic competency in literacy and numeracy? And if so, might not standards be helpful in addressing these more technical issues even if they cannot address broader issues of values?

Unfortunately, even when it comes to some of the narrower goals of education, there is no evidence that standards deemed to be higher quality are effective in producing higher levels of literacy and numeracy. I'm aware of four analyses that have examined whether states with standards judged to be better have greater academic achievement. I've provided references to these four analyses in the written version of my testimony. None of them show any relationship between the ratings of state standards according to the Fordham Institute and Education Week and each state's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. I'm not aware of any empirical analyses that show that "better" standards lead to better outcomes for students.

The lack of relationship between the judged quality of state standards and student achievement should raise a number of concerns for this Council. First, it should make you doubt claims about the quality of Common Core standards. How does anyone know whether Common Core standards are good and will contribute to academic achievement if no one has ever found a relationship between Common Core (or any standards for that matter) and student outcomes? Many people claim to be expert judges of the

quality of standards but no one's judgment has been validated by actual improvement in student performance.

Second, perhaps the lack of relationship between expert judgments about the quality of standards and student achievement is explained by the fact that there is not a single path to academic success for all of our incredibly different children. Common Core or other standards might be good for some students in some circumstances, but bad for other students in other situations. The reason why expert claims about the quality of standards have never aligned with student achievement is that there is no single set of standards that could be optimal for promoting even basic literacy and numeracy for all students. Standards, particularly national standards, are then a fool's enterprise of one size fits none.

Third, the lack of relationship between "better" standards and achievement might be caused by low levels of compliance by schools and educators rather than the unreliable judgment of experts. That is, standards are just a bunch of words in a document. Even if they are the right words and even if one set of words could fit what all children need, there is no assurance that schools or educators would teach to those standards. Schools and educators have their own ideas about the proper goals of education and little can be done to force them to change their practice.

Key backers of Common Core standards are aware of this problem and so the U.S. Department of Education funded the development of new tests that would be aligned with these national standards. If these new tests could detect whether schools and educators were changing their practices in the ways desired by Common Core and if rewards and punishments could be imposed on schools and educators for their compliance with the new standards, then perhaps the empty words of standards could be transformed into a real change in the education system.

The problem with trying to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced tests to drive Common Core changes is that it almost certainly requires more coercion than is politically possible and would be undesirable even if it could be accomplished. If Arkansas tries to use the PARCC test to impose strong enough sanctions on schools and educators to drive changes in their practice, we will witness a well-organized and effective counter-attack from educators and sympathetic parents who will likely neuter those sanctions. If, on the other hand, the consequences of PARCC are roughly the equivalent of double secret probation in the movie, *Animal House*, then no one has to change practice to align with the new standards.

And even if by some political miracle the new PARCC test could be used to impose tough sanctions on schools and educators who failed to comply with Common Core, it's a really bad idea to try to run school systems with a test. All sorts of bad things happen when maximizing performance on standardized tests becomes the governing principle of schools. Schools and educators are likely to narrow the curriculum by focusing on tested subjects at the expense of untested ones. If we care at all about the Arts, History, and Science we should oppose trying to run schools with math and ELA tests. And within tested subjects schools and educators are likely to focus narrowly on tested items at the expense of a more complete understanding of math and English.

Common Core is unlikely to produce meaningful changes in practice without an aligned test that punishes schools and educators, but those types of harsh consequences are unlikely to survive the

political opposition of educators and parents. And even if PARCC could impose tough consequences to drive changes in practice, the changes would produce a disastrous narrowing in the curriculum of schools.

So what should this Council recommend? Given that there is no technically correct set of standards and given that expert judgment about the quality of standards has never been validated by better student outcomes, there is no reason for Arkansas to defer to the small group of national experts who drafted the Common Core standards. Arkansas policymakers, educators, and parents know as much about effective standards as these self-proclaimed experts. So we should be empowered to write our own standards that reflect our own priorities and values in education. If standards are about values, they should be developed as close to the people to whom they apply as is practical.

But even standards that are developed in a decentralized way will fail to capture all of the legitimate diversity of goals and needs. For that reason, even standards that are developed locally should be humble about what they can accomplish and the extent to which schools and educators ought to change their practice as a result. In the end, it is families, educators, and communities who need to set appropriate goals for individual children, not the state and certainly not the national government or organizations.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we should abandon PARCC and purchase an already-developed, nationally-normed standardized test from ACT or any of the reputable testing companies. The purpose of PARCC is to drive changes in educator behavior in ways that are desired by Common Core. But we should not be using tests aligned with a set of standards to coerce schools and educators to change their practice. What we really need from standardized testing is just information about how our students are performing. This can be accomplished at much lower cost by just buying a nationally-normed test off of the shelf. And lower stakes tests that are primarily about information rather than coercion will produce much less harmful narrowing of the curriculum.

References

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