

# MEMORANDUM

To: Governor Asa Hutchinson  
From: Governor's Council on Common Core Review  
Date: 30 July 2015  
Re: Findings and Recommendations

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## INTRODUCTION

Governor Asa Hutchinson assembled our 17 member Council on Common Core Review, which includes parents, educators and community leaders, and Lieutenant Governor Tim Griffin as Chair. For many of us, this assignment is not simply professional, it is personal: We love Arkansas, and our children and grandchildren attend Arkansas public schools and are touched by the standards we were asked to review. We were charged to conduct a review of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—including related testing and data privacy—and provide the governor with recommendations regarding the way forward. Our priority was to listen, and we did. We relied heavily on public input, especially input received during our nine city listening tour which allowed us to hear from parents, educators and concerned Arkansans in their communities for a total of 18 hours. We also held over 40 hours of hearings in five days, which included 16 panels and 50 witnesses offering a wide range of perspectives. We have maintained our commitment to the highest standards and expectations for our students. The following findings and recommendations reflect the synthesized views of the Council as a whole and not necessarily any individual member.

## FINDINGS

Considering all of the information gathered, the Council finds that:

### Standards

1. Robust and constant communication and collaboration with Arkansans, especially parents and educators, regarding educational standards and testing is vital, not only to the successful implementation, but also to the successful *development* of state standards. Since even before the adoption of the CCSS, there has been insufficient communication with Arkansans, parents and educators, on the whole, regarding the CCSS. Simply put, closer communication and collaboration with Arkansans would have allowed the State to address concerns over the CCSS, giving us stronger, more rigorous and more widely accepted educational standards.
2. Educators are almost unanimous in the opinion that the old Arkansas standards, the “Arkansas Benchmark Standards,” were less rigorous than and inferior to the current CCSS.
3. Many educators believe that the CCSS are fundamentally and instructionally sound.

4. Some educators and parents are critical of the CCSS and opposed to them for a variety of reasons. While not unanimous, a significant majority of educators generally approve of the CCSS.
5. Educators have spent countless hours learning and implementing the CCSS. Certainty and consistency, to the extent possible, are important to parents and educators and are building blocks of a sound educational structure.
6. Some school districts have been more successful than others at implementing the CCSS, and in those instances, effective communication between district leadership, educators and parents has been a critical component of the success.
7. Criticism of the CCSS ranges widely from well-founded to completely baseless. Further, a significant percentage of criticism directed at the CCSS was attributable to frustration and dissatisfaction with other issues, such as testing, associated with the CCSS but not mandated by the CCSS.
8. Also, a significant percentage of the criticism of and dissatisfaction with the CCSS stems from failure to implement the standards as intended at the district and school level. There is widespread inconsistency in the implementation of the CCSS around the state—district to district, school to school. For example, one of the most common criticisms of the CCSS was the teaching of “common core math.” In many instances, what was called “common core math” was actually the mathematics instructional methodology known as Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI). For example, some educators have been instructed to use CGI exclusively, while others have been instructed to use CGI in addition to traditional mathematics instructional methods. While it is by no means the only criticism of the Mathematics standards, it was a frequent topic of discussion, frustration and dissatisfaction at both our hearings and our listening sessions.
9. Some educators find the standards unclear or subject to more than one reasonable interpretation.
10. Educators are not required to use all or any of the reading materials suggested in the English Language Arts (ELA) text exemplars provided to Arkansas educators under the CCSS, but educators rely on them and often adopt them verbatim because they are provided.
11. We heard conflicting testimony from parents and educators regarding the developmentally appropriateness of the CCSS particularly for kindergarten and first grade. Early childhood development experts are divided nationally regarding the developmentally appropriateness of the CCSS when considering kindergarten and first grade.
12. An achievement gap currently exists between majority and minority students in Arkansas. Some states that have implemented the CCSS have seen an increase in their achievement gap, and we must work to ensure that the achievement gap in Arkansas is addressed.
13. According to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the CCSS between the State of Arkansas, the National

Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) was terminated upon the adoption of the CCSS and is no longer in effect.

## **Testing**

14. Much of the criticism of and dissatisfaction with the CCSS stems from parental and educator dissatisfaction with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test. As such, there is widespread frustration among parents and educators regarding the testing component and the State's participation in the PARCC consortium.

15. Educators testified that up to 6 weeks of classroom instructional time was lost due to teachers being removed from the classroom to proctor or otherwise assist with the PARCC test.

16. American College Testing (ACT) is a nationally recognized brand, has relevance to Arkansas students and reduces the testing time. We must have comparability between states and on this point, the Council believes PARCC is a descendant brand from which states are fleeing, and ACT is becoming more and more attractive, especially for states who have decided to revise, rebrand or break from the CCSS.

17. The endorsement of the Governor and the State Board of Education to approve the Council's recommendation to terminate Arkansas's agreement with PARCC and replace it with a test prepared by ACT will address the most significant complaints of parents and educators regarding testing, including the amount of time students spent taking the PARCC test and the amount of instructional time lost due to teachers being removed from their classrooms to proctor or otherwise assist with the PARCC test.

18. All special education students are tested. Arkansas law provides for a 1% of student body cap on the testing of special education students. The federal government cap is 2%.

## **Data Privacy**

19. School districts, the State of Arkansas and vendors such as testing companies possess student data, including personally identifiable information.

20. Some schools are currently obtaining biometric data and other data from students without the consent of their parents.

21. Arkansas has insufficient state laws governing personally identifiable information.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the Council recommends that:

### Standards

1. Arkansas maintain complete and unfettered control over our educational standards to ensure that they reflect the highest and best standards for our students and will allow us to succeed in an internationally competitive economy.
2. The Governor require a comprehensive review of the standards with the goal of revising, improving and replacing, as warranted, both the Mathematics and ELA standards and ensuring that the experiences of parents and educators are reflected and utilized in the Arkansas standards. The review should include, for example, an examination and assessment of the mathematics multiplication tables and whether they are sufficiently rigorous. In addition, the review should include the ELA text exemplars to ensure that they are consistent with Arkansas's educational goals. These examples are merely illustrative and not exhaustive.
3. The Governor continue the work started this year by the Curriculum and Instruction Unit of the ADE surveying Arkansans, especially parents and educators, seeking additional information to be used in the revision of Arkansas Mathematics and ELA standards.
4. The Governor ensure that the standards are reviewed and improved pursuant to the process established in current Arkansas law A.C.A. § 6-15-101 (2015) and the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and Accountability Program (ACTAAP) Rules 4.0 or another appropriate process to be determined by the Governor and the Legislature.
5. The standards be seen as a constantly improving set of standards that are routinely reviewed and assessed with the goal of attaining the highest and best standards for our students, considering not only national recommendations but also the experience and lessons learned of our parents and educators.
6. The Governor ensure that changes, revisions and improvements are ongoing and iterative, not a one-time task to be completed.
7. The Governor maintain the current CCSS until changes, revisions and improvements to the standards are implemented.
8. The Governor work to improve communication among the ADE, cooperatives, school districts and schools to ensure that Arkansas's standards are consistently implemented as intended at the district and school level.
9. The Governor work to improve communication between the ADE, school districts, schools and parents so that there is clear understanding regarding Arkansas's standards.

10. The Governor instruct the ADE to annotate the standards with footnotes, comments or other instructional devices to ensure that there is consistency of understanding among educators and parents regarding the meaning of provisions, domains, sections, etc.
11. The Governor instruct the ADE to develop a smartphone app for the Arkansas educational standards so that Arkansans have mobile access to the standards and other related materials.
12. Educators should be encouraged to use the most appropriate teaching methods—within their district parameters—to ensure their students master the standards at the highest possible level.
13. The Governor ensure that school districts understand that they are free to use instructional methodology such as CGI, for example, alongside traditional mathematics instructional methodology, among others, and are not restricted to CGI only.
14. Arkansas parents and educators continue to pay special attention to the suitability of Arkansas standards for kindergarten and first grade in particular and make changes in accordance with lessons learned.
15. In compliance with Arkansas law concerning equity in funding, consideration should be given to lower resource/lower funded school districts. The Governor should work to ensure appropriate funding and resources be provided to all school districts so that Arkansas’s standards can be implemented successfully. The Governor should monitor and address any achievement gap as warranted.
16. The Governor work with the ADE and the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) to assess student matriculation to and through four-year colleges and universities, two-year colleges, technical schools or vocational schools and military service in order to evaluate student performance.

### **Testing**

17. Consideration should be given to students for portfolio assessment in ELA and Mathematics based on the student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP).
18. Arkansas should raise the 1% of student body cap on the testing of special education students to match the federal law which provides for a 2% cap on the testing of special education students.
19. The Governor stay the course and use the test prepared by ACT because it reduces the testing time and is aligned with college and career readiness standards.

### **Data Privacy**

20. The Governor work with the legislature to review the laws governing personally identifiable information and make such laws more restrictive where necessary.

21. The Governor ensure that all third party companies and entities with which the state deals on testing have the most rigorous data protection provisions and policy and Arkansas maintains control of our students' data.