



MADISON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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RE: Testimony for HB 5078: Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee on Education,

It is my hope that we are opening the door to intellectually honest discourse, based on the research and evidence before us, to encourage all involved to think independently, to ask hard questions, and to consider the intended and unintended consequences of our policies, just as we teach our students to do.

The fever pitch that has grown over the implementation of the common core state standards does in fact have its roots in well-founded concerns. Those concerns are twofold, quite simply, the process by which the standards were adopted, and the actual content of the standards. To further complicate this issue, the common core is cloaked in a series of false narratives, or urgent calls to action, along with declarations, or promises made about the future impact of the standards, which have been questioned by prominent and established scholars. Finally, the common core is at the intersection of other initiatives, namely, educator evaluation and a new generation of high stakes standardized tests, the Smarter Balanced test (SBAC).

Focused solutions and resources are always best served by accurately framing the problem. The call for higher standards is a compelling “sound byte”, however, this may be a proposed solution searching for a problem to solve. A deep analysis by the Brookings Institute demonstrates that, after three decades of being at the center of education reform, “States have tried numerous ways to better their schools through standards. And yet, good and bad standards and all of those in between, along with all of the implementation tools currently known to policymakers, have produced outcomes that indicate one thing: Standards do not matter very much.” Additionally, by examining performance on the only current common national assessment, the NAEP test, the 2012 Brown Center Report on American Education analyzed the variation of student performance within an individual state, known as the achievement gap. It noted that, “Common state standards might reduce variation between states, but it is difficult to imagine how they will reduce variation within states. After all, districts and schools within the same state have been operating under common standards for several years and, in some states, for decades.”

Some observations about the common core are technically accurate, but fail under close inspection. Yes, the common core is technically not a curriculum; however, due to extreme budget cuts over the past five years, the budgets that support local curriculum development, and staff development positions, have dried up in an effort to preserve classroom teaching positions, leaving a local curriculum development team a rare commodity. Further conflating this claim is the presence of new, high stakes tests that, based on a wide body of scholarly evidence, will narrow and dictate what is taught. The test will become the curriculum and compel compliance in this test-based accountability era. These two national testing consortia have received over \$300 million federal dollars to develop these tests. According to the Pioneer Institute in Massachusetts, these two consortia indicated on their applications that they will also develop curriculum materials and instructional practice guides. For cash-strapped districts, off the shelf curriculum materials will be necessary purchases, thereby minimizing, and perhaps, eliminating, local curriculum development.

Another technically accurate common core observation is that standards and testing are not a new development, that we've had standards and tests for over 25 years. Yet, the process to adopt the common core was unlike any standards adopting process in Connecticut's history. This process has obvious consequences, such as the current skepticism in professional and parental communities around the state. Truncated public comment, with no public hearings or debates is a stark difference from the inclusive, public process that drove the drafting and adoption of prior Connecticut standards. Historically, prominent teacher leaders from across the state were invited to participate in a drafting of the standards in their areas of expertise. Public comment would be solicited. Numerous iterations and processes as long as three years would ensure inclusiveness. Furthermore, all of this work was subject to Freedom of Information laws. However, the national common core validation committee was required to sign confidentiality agreements, thus perpetuating the skepticism. Their discourse would be kept private. Finally, unlike prior processes, according to Chad Colby, spokesman for Achieve Inc., the education non-profit that helped develop the Common Core, states can make subtractions and changes to this copyrighted set of standards , but they do so at their own peril as common assessments being developed by the two national consortia test the common core as it's written. Practically speaking, if it is not tested, will any state changes really matter?

Other claims such as the initiative being state-led and that implementation will close the international achievement gap also fail under close inspection. Although it is true that discussion of national standards goes back over a decade to the Clinton administration, it is well documented that the state adoption process was heavily incentivized by federal grants and waivers, and heavily financed by large philanthropic organizations. Furthermore, according to such authorities as the Economic Policy Institute, and the Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit, in an analysis of international performance, when controlled for poverty, U.S. students perform at or near the top of all economically developed nations on international exams.

For anyone who had led a change initiative, the lesson is clear...process is king. For the reasons mentioned, the process of the development and adoption of the common core has soured educators and parents across the state. All of the promise of the common core, and there is promise in a number of the standards, is lost due to a failure to invite honest, transparent discourse, and hard questions.

The common core is now inextricably linked to evaluation reforms and the new SBAC high stakes state test. In order to realize any promise the common core has to offer, an effort must be made to untangle these reforms. The question today is whether or not a moratorium is appropriate, or even reasonably possible?

As I feel it is the responsibility of every educational leader to raise critical questions and thoughts about important issues, I'd like to offer the following:

1. Engage in the process with Connecticut's early childhood experts to genuinely examine the evidence related to the developmental appropriateness of the standards. This matter is not settled and communities need reassurance that our youngest learners will receive a developmentally appropriate education in light of the common core and accompanying SBAC test. Examine the viability of a standards and testing contingency plan in the event the findings necessitate such action.
2. In an effort to untangle the multiple reforms, revisit the NCLB waiver that was filed with the U.S. Department of Education. The renewal process of the waiver offers an opportunity to modify its provisions. For instance,
 - Although federal law requires states to annually administer statewide standardized tests, the waiver only requires teacher evaluation systems to "take into account multiple valid measures, including as a significant factor, data on student growth.
 - None of the NCLB waiver materials that I'm aware of make any reference to standardized tests, in fact, the phrase most often used is "multiple valid measures".
 - A case can be made that Connecticut's application far exceeded the requirements of the waiver by, among other things, linking statewide standardized tests to evaluations
 - Other states received waivers without making this link or indicating a set percentage that such testing would be worth in evaluations
3. Given that the root of most concerns can be drawn back to the misuse of high stakes standardized tests, as you revisit the NCLB waiver, aggressively pursue modifications that:
 - Permanently decouple any use of high stakes standardized tests (SBAC) with the evaluation of individual teachers or principals by following the volumes of literature clearly demonstrating the harmful unintended consequences and lack of validity of this practice
 - Eliminate the current meaningless teacher evaluation scoring/weighting systems
 - Eliminate "one size fits all" compliance mandates by:
 - Granting more control to local boards of education to develop evaluation systems and innovations that fit the context and needs of their districts
 - Use high stakes tests (SBAC) judiciously and not in a high stakes manner