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## **Invited Testimony on the Low Quality of the Common Core Standards**

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I thank Chairman Robert Schaffer, Vice Chair Marcia Neal, and other members of the Colorado State Board of Education for their invitation to present testimony at a hearing on the low quality of the Common Core standards and their visible, negative effects on the English curriculum.

**My professional background:** I draw on much state and national experience with K-12 standards, curricula, and assessments. I was the senior associate commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education from 1999-2003 where, among other duties, I was in charge of the development or revision of all the state's K-12 standards (and teacher licensure tests). I reviewed all states' English language arts and reading standards for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 1997, 2000, and 2005. I co-authored Achieve's American Diploma Project high school exit standards for English in 2004. I served on Common Core's Validation Committee from 2009-2010. My most recent book is *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum: What Secondary English Teachers Can Do* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, <http://www.amazon.com/Death-Resurrection-Coherent-Literature-Curriculum/dp/1610485580>).

### **I will speak to the following points:**

- 1. The low quality of Common Core's English language arts standards, especially in grades 6-12.**
- 2. The non-transparent process that was used to develop Common Core's standards.**
- 3. How Common Core's ELA standards are already damaging the K-12 curriculum.**
- 4. The superior quality of Colorado's own English language arts standards.**

**Point 1: The low quality of Common Core's ELA standards, especially in grades 6-12.** Common Core's "college readiness" standards for English language arts and reading are simply empty skill sets. Until the two testing consortia allow the public to examine sufficient examples of the reading passages

they will use on the common tests based on these standards, we have no way of knowing if high school students will be expected to read college-level material before they are judged "college-ready."

As empty skill sets, Common Core's ELA standards do not strengthen the high school curriculum. Nor can they reduce post-secondary remedial coursework in a legitimate way. As empty skill sets, Common Core's ELA "college readiness" standards weaken the base of literary and cultural knowledge needed for authentic college coursework, decrease the capacity for analytical thinking (as I will explain below), and completely muddle the development of writing skills.

To indicate the deficiencies in Common Core's ELA "college readiness" and grade-level standards, I quote from the Fordham Institute's own review in 2010, which implicitly suggests they deserve no more than a D (even though Fordham gave them a B+ for reasons best known to Fordham).

**Overview:** ...They would be more helpful to teachers if they attended as systematically to content as they do to skills, especially in the area of reading...

**Clarity and Specificity:** ... The organization of the reading standards is hard to follow...They are organized into four categories... Since many kinds of texts, genres, sub-genres, and their characteristics are discussed in each category, it is also difficult to determine whether a logical sequence covering all of this important content has been achieved. ... the organization of the reading strand, as well as the instances of vague and unmeasurable language, mean that the standards do not ultimately provide sufficient clarity and detail to guide teachers and curriculum and assessment developers effectively.

**Content and Rigor:** ...The reading standards for both literature and informational text fail to address the specific text types, genres, and sub-genres in a systematic intersection with the skills they target. As written, the standards often address skills as they might apply to a number of genres and sub-genres. As a result, some essential content goes missing.

The...standards for grades 6-12 exhibit only minor distinctions across the grades, such as citing evidence "to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text." Several problems surface here. First, these standards don't properly scaffold skills from grade to grade. For example, quoting from text is arguably easier than paraphrasing, but the standards require mastery of paraphrasing first. Second, these standards are also repeated verbatim in the informational text strand, thus making no distinction between applying this skill to literary and informational text.

What's more, while some genres are mentioned occasionally in the standards, others, such as speeches, essays, and many forms of poetry, are rarely if ever mentioned by name. Similarly, many sub-genres, such as satires or epic poems, are never addressed.

Many defining characteristics of the various genres are also rarely, if ever, mentioned...Where literary elements *are* mentioned, their treatment is spotty. ...

The Writing standards include too many expectations that begin with the phrase, "With guidance and support from adults..." Such standards are problematic because they fail to adequately scaffold or clearly delineate what *students* should be able to do.

One troublesome aspect of the writing standards is the persistently blurry line between an "argument" and an "informative/explanatory essay." ...

**Bottom Line:** ...overwhelming focus on skills over content in reading combined with confusion about the writing standards, lack of detail about oral presentations, and the sporadic rigor of the media standards.

**Point 2: The non-transparent process that was used to develop Common Core's standards.** The two organizations responsible for the Common Core standards (the National Governors Association and the Council for Chief School State Officers) have yet to explain why they chose unqualified people to write

the standards. The chief architects for the English language arts standards (David Coleman and Susan Pimentel) have never taught English or reading at any grade level from K-12. Similarly, the chief architects for the mathematics standards (Professors William McCallum and Jason Zimba) have never taught mathematics at any grade level from K-12. Their inability to formulate and sequence developmentally appropriate standards, especially in grades 6-12 (as well as to write clear and unambiguous standards) is apparent in the inferior products they produced.

Supporters of Common Core's standards have consistently claimed without providing relevant evidence that the high school standards in ELA and mathematics are internationally benchmarked and research-based. Common Core's Validation Committee, on which I served, was described as a group of national and international experts who would ensure that the standards were internationally benchmarked and supported by a body of research evidence. Even though several of us regularly asked to examine this supposed body of evidence, our requests were ignored. After submitting many detailed critiques from October 2009 to May 2010 in a futile effort to remedy the basic deficiencies of Common Core's ELA standards, I, along with four other members of the Validation Committee, declined to sign off on the final version.

**Point 3. How Common Core's English language arts standards are already damaging the English and reading curriculum.**

**1. *Common Core requires English teachers to spend over 50 percent of their reading instructional time on nonfiction/informational texts.*** Common Core divides its reading standards into 10 for informational text and 9 for literature. English teachers are being ordered across the country to teach informational material at least 50% of the time, even though they are not trained to teach informational reading in any college English department or teacher preparation program. They are being told to reduce literary study, in some cases to excerpts, in order to reach that quota.

**2. *Common Core's division of reading standards make it impossible for English teachers to construct a coherent literature curriculum in grades 6-12.*** Common Core's standards provide no intellectual base or structure for a literature curriculum and actually prevent one from emerging. A 50 percent quota for nonfiction and informational reading at each grade level means that test developers will shape the English curriculum by means of the kind of "informational" texts they choose. To judge by examples the National Council of Teachers of English is promoting, many of these selections will be advocacy journalism (e.g., on teen-age marketing, fast foods, the working poor) designed to stimulate the writing of "arguments" by K-12 students.

**3. *Common Core's ELA standards will entail drastic costs in order to change academic coursework, professional preparation programs, and professional development for prospective or current English teachers.*** English teachers will need a significant amount of professional development to teach reading drawn from other subjects, something which even secondary reading teachers are not prepared to do, given their lack of background in content areas. This is an enormous waste of time and money that will result in poorer reading and writing by students, as well as a widening of the demographic gaps.

**4. Common Core's ELA standards will lead to a lower capacity for analytical or "critical" thinking.**

Teachers and parents are regularly being told that more technical and persuasive writing will boost students' critical thinking. But little analytical thinking is apt to appear in letters to the principal about cafeteria food that kids are often encouraged to write in order to practice writing a "persuasive" letter. Reading researchers know there is absolutely no research to support the idea that increased study of "literary non-fiction" or "informational" texts in the English class, or increases in persuasive writing, will increase students' level of analytical thinking. There is every reason to believe they will, instead, lower the level.

**Point 4: The superior quality of Colorado's previous English language arts standards.** Let me quote again from the Fordham Institute's own review in 2010.

([http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/Colorado.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Colorado.pdf))

"Colorado's standards for literary and non-literary text analysis are more thorough and detailed than the Common Core, addressing specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both literary and non-literary texts. In addition, Colorado includes a strand devoted to "research and reasoning" which, despite occasional overreaching, outlines more detailed and rigorous expectations for logic. Colorado's standards for oral presentations are also clearer and more detailed than those presented in the Common Core."

"At grade 11, students are required to "demonstrate knowledge of classical foundational works of American literature," a welcome addition. This standard is presented in the context of other "critical reading approaches," such as analyzing literary devices; explaining the influence of historical context; and interpreting and synthesizing themes across texts, so the standards do not appear out of the blue."

"The writing standards address both the characteristics of good writing generally and those that are specific to genres. All genres of writing are developed and, in high school, appropriate emphasis is placed on the development of arguments, as in this grade 11 standard: 'Evaluate and revise own text as needed to eliminate logical fallacies and to enhance credibility of ideas and information.'"

Why did Colorado trade in a silk purse for a sow's ear?

**Recommendation:** Colorado should return to the fine standards it once had in English and further refine them where needed. In addition to key authors, literary periods, and literary traditions that influenced the development of the English language, the standards could require students to study, at appropriate grade levels, works by prominent authors who were born in or wrote about Colorado, as well as biographical selections about prominent figures in U.S. and Colorado history from Colorado. These works could then help define the academic expectations in Colorado high schools at the same time they strengthen local control of curriculum and instruction.

It would not be difficult for experienced and well-read English teachers in Colorado to develop an even better set of ELA standards for 6-12 than they already have. Moreover, most of the new standards could be assessed by the first-rate test items developed by English teachers in Massachusetts for its own state assessments and released annually for public scrutiny. In other words, the cost for testing could be minimal.