

**Why North Carolina's English Language Arts Standards Need Complete Revision:
Testimony for North Carolina's Academic Standards Review Commission**

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Overview of Testimony: Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments to the North Carolina Academic Standards Review Commission on the deficiencies in North Carolina's current standards for English language arts (ELA). I first describe briefly 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 North Carolina's current ELA standards, which were voted in by the state board of education in 2011. These standards seem to be identical to Common Core's ELA standards. Another set of ELA standards is referred to as "content" standards in North Carolina documents. They are called Extended Common Core State Standards in a comparison, or "crosswalk," constructed by the NC Department of Public Instruction.

My Qualifications: I am professor *emerita* at the University of Arkansas, where I held the 21st 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 for K-12 students and teachers that contributed to academic gains in all students in Massachusetts.

Lack of 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.

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.

Lack of 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, 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. Nor did the standards writers offer any research evidence or rationale to defend their omission of the mathematics standards needed for STEM careers, their de-emphasis on 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 did not even offer evidence that Common Core's standards meet entrance requirements for *most colleges and universities* in this country or elsewhere.

Flaws in North Carolina's Current ELA Standards

I. Most of North Carolina's 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 cannot prepare students for college work, a career, or active citizenship in an English-speaking country.

A. 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).

Analogous “extended content standards” in North Carolina in grades 11/12:

1. Determine which quotes best demonstrate the explicit meaning or an inference drawn from the text (e.g., teacher provides an inference drawn from the text and student determines one or more quotes that support it).
2. Determine the theme or central idea of a text and select details that show how it is conveyed in the text; recount the text.
3. Determine how characters change and develop over the course of the text.

B. Other examples of Common Core literature standards in grades 11/12:

7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)
9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Analogous “extended content standard” in North Carolina:

7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), comparing and contrasting how each version interprets the source text.
9. Determine explicit understanding of accounts of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works of American literature.

C. Examples of Common Core informational reading standards for grades 11/12:

8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., The Federalist, presidential addresses).
9. Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Analogous “extended content standards” in North Carolina:

8. Demonstrate understandings of claims and arguments in works of public advocacy presented in print, video, or recounted formats.
9. Determine the purpose of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights) presented in print, video, audio, or recounted formats.

D. Examples of authentic ELA 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.

II. North Carolina expects English teachers to spend at least half of their reading instructional time at every grade level on informational texts. North Carolina lists 10 reading standards for informational texts and 10 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.

III. North Carolina 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.

IV. North Carolina Offers Extremely Weak Vocabulary Standards Vocabulary knowledge is the key to reading comprehension, as 100 years of reading research have shown. Yet, the NC standards on vocabulary acquisition are among the weakest standards in ELA and are at the elementary level. For example, the following standards are the only ones for grades 11/12 in the “extended Common Core State Standards.”

1. Demonstrate knowledge of words and phrases drawn from English language arts, math, and science content.
 - a. Use context to identify which word in an array of content related words is missing from a sentence.
 - b. Seek clarification and meaning support when unfamiliar words are encountered while reading or communicating.
 - c. Use glossaries and beginning dictionaries (print or digital) to clarify the meaning of words and phrases.
2. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language and words relationships. Interpret simple figures of speech (e.g., It's raining cats and dogs) encountered while reading or listening.
3. Analyze the meaning of multiple meaning words when encountered while reading or listening.

V. North Carolina 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.

Recommendations to North Carolina's Academic Review Commission:

1. Request the NC Board of Education to develop rigorous, internationally benchmarked standards at the secondary level. For an interim period, adopt the highest-rated 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 North Carolina teachers to use than Common Core's or what it now has. I have also provided free of charge a set of non-copyrighted ELA standards, dated 2013, for any state to tailor as it wishes.

2. Request your legislature to ask the state's own engineering, science, and mathematics faculty and literary/humanities scholars to develop entrance exams (matriculation tests) for NC institutions of higher education. Ask these faculty members to collaborate with mathematics and science teachers in North Carolina high schools in designing syllabi for advanced mathematics and science courses in North Carolina high schools. Why should officials in Washington DC decide admission standards for North Carolina's own institutions?

3. Request the NC Board of Education to offer 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.

4. Request the legislature to restructure teacher and administrator training programs in North Carolina 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 other teacher licensure tests I developed in Massachusetts, available at relatively no cost to the state.

References

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