

Common Core: Low-Quality and Intrusive
By Joy Pullmann, Heartland Institute education research fellow

Pennsylvania State Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing on Common Core State Standards, May 15, 2013

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time and attention to this important topic, and especially to Chairman Folmer for the invitation to speak. As legislatures had almost no involvement with Common Core at the beginning, it is appropriate that you at least have a chance to consider how it will influence your responsibilities to Pennsylvania education. I'm Joy Pullmann, an education research fellow at The Heartland Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that researches and promotes ideas that empower individuals. I speak my own mind on this issue, as we rarely take institute-wide positions.

First, a few points of clarity. Pennsylvania's State Board of Education in March adopted a revised version of Common Core, which they call Pennsylvania Common Core. It consists of the entire national Common Core plus three appendices. Any state additions to Common Core may comprise no more than 13 percent of the final standards. So no matter what you call it, all remarks on the national Common Core apply since Pennsylvania students will encounter all of it.

Second, proponents of Common Core insist on calling the project "state-led." At best, this is misleading. The organizations that created Common Core are funded by the federal government, private foundations (most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), and big businesses.¹ They are private trade associations that have no authority over states, but insist all governors or state school chiefs are members, even if these individuals publicly renounce membership. They make their decisions in private, and do not publish the names of people present or the positions they've taken during discussions. While there were 135 prestigious-sounding people listed as Common Core contributors, including three from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education,² people who sat on those committees told me they had no power over the outcome. The four people who did were the standards' lead writers, who have never been K-12 teachers, and none are from Pennsylvania. In addition, the same Gates Foundation that helped sponsor the Core also funded public relations campaigns for it nationwide through organizations including \$260,000 to the Pennsylvania Business Council and \$700,000 to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children,³ whose representatives are testifying here today. It's odd to consider this initiative "state-led" when vast majorities of state legislators and the public never heard of it until two years after states had already signed the papers. In short, applying the phrase "state-led" to Common Core does not mean what most people think when hearing it, and is therefore deliberately deceptive.

¹ "State-Led' Common Core Pushed by Federally Funded Nonprofit," Joy Pullmann, *School Reform News*, April 24, 2013:

<http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2013/04/24/state-led-common-core-pushed-federally-funded-nonprofit>.

² "Common Core Standards Initiative K-12 Standards Development Teams," National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, November 10, 2009: <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2010COMMONCOREK12TEAM.PDF>.

³ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grants database, searched May 13, 2013: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database#q=k=pennsylvania%20business>.

Third, let's discuss the distinction between curriculum and standards. Common Core proponents want to have things both ways. Curriculum experts such as the Fordham Institute's Kathleen Porter-Magee believe Common Core will lead to a literarily rich national curriculum.⁴ But they will also say standards are not a curriculum. While being somewhat self-contradicting, that's semantically true. Standards function like a table of contents for curriculum, outlining what will be tested and what will not. Essentially, standards do not constitute but do define curriculum. The Pennsylvania Board of Education recently put out a factsheet on Common Core that says, "Local school districts have complete control over what curriculum to use to meet the standards." This is somewhat like Henry Ford's legendary statement, "Any customer can have a [Model T] painted any color he wants, so long as it is black." In the age of standards-based accountability, the state essentially determines what kids will be taught by mandating what will be tested. One can debate whether it is wise to have states crack the whip over school districts, but we at least need to be honest and admit that whoever determines the tests determines what schools that must administer them will teach.

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education clearly understands this, because its March revisions to state code say, "Assessment in public education is designed to determine student attainment of State and local academic standards."⁵ The revisions also require school districts to provide the state a plan concerning how they will administer the standards and make students perform well according to their metrics. (And I can't help but note that the state board incorrectly refers to the United States as a "constitutional democracy" in this document.)

So now that we're more clear on what standards are and do and how they will affect school districts, let's talk about whether these will improve student achievement—which is the whole point of most education reforms—and how Common Core feeds a vast expansion of invasive student data tracking.

Common Core supporters typically avoid two preliminary, fundamental observations about their pet project. First, there is no evidence that Common Core has benefitted students anywhere in the world because it, unlike state standards, has never been pilot tested. It is entirely experimental. Second, the evidence we have on the last 30 years of standards-based accountability is not promising. Even if Common Core was academically superb—and it is not—the Brookings Institution has found no statistical relationship between a state having high standards and high student achievement. "Every state already has standards placing all districts and schools within its borders under a common regime. And despite that, every state has tremendous within-state variation in achievement," says the latest such report.⁶ In fact, an analysis from Stanford University economist Eric Hanushek shows that states with higher standards tend to have lower

⁴ "The Truth About Common Core," Kathleen Porter-Magee and Sol Stern, *National Review Online*, April 3, 2013: <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/344519/truth-about-common-core-kathleen-porter-magee>.

⁵ Pennsylvania Board of Education final changes to 22 PA Code Chapter 4, March 14, 2013: [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/http://www.portal.state.pa.us:80/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_664124_1327195_0_0_18/Chapter_4_FINAL-FORM_\(3.14.13\).pdf](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/http://www.portal.state.pa.us:80/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_664124_1327195_0_0_18/Chapter_4_FINAL-FORM_(3.14.13).pdf).

⁶ "How Well Are American Students Learning?" Tom Loveless, Brookings Institution, Volume III, Number 1 (February 2012): www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/2/brown%20center/0216_brown_education_loveless.pdf.

student performance, when compared on the same test.⁷ This is also true internationally: Countries with national standards both perform well and poorly.⁸ There is also no evidence the massive increase in spending and standards-based, high-stakes testing forced on states by the federal government under No Child Left Behind has improved student achievement one whit.⁹

Even if Common Core and standards had a good track record, what we know about standards demonstrates Common Core is academically mediocre. Education leaders bought a pile of shiny labels for Common Core, which include “rigorous,” “college- and career-ready,” and “internationally benchmarked.” The evidence shows this is simply not true. All of the content experts on Common Core’s own validation committee, which was supposed to certify the standards lived up to their labels, refused to sign because they believe the standards do not. Stanford’s James Milgram and the University of Arkansas’ Sandra Stotsky were the only math and English content experts, respectively, to sit on that panel. Here’s what they have to say about Common Core, which has been echoed and amplified by dozens of other respected voices.

Common Core’s writers refused to provide evidence to the validation committee that research supports the Core and that it is benchmarked to international bests, Stotsky notes.¹⁰ She also critiques the Core’s “hard to follow,” “low-quality” English language arts standards that constitute “simply empty skill sets.”¹¹ Dr. Stotsky is directly responsible for Massachusetts’ standards, which were the highest in the nation before the state opted for Common Core. While Common Core shifts students to heavier doses of nonfiction, Stotsky writes “there is absolutely no empirical research to suggest that college readiness is promoted by informational or nonfiction reading in high school English classes (or in mathematics and science classes).”¹²

Switching over to the math: “[B]y the end of fifth grade the material being covered in arithmetic and algebra in Core Standards is more than a year behind the early grade expectations in most high-achieving countries. By the end of seventh grade Core Standards are roughly two years behind,” Milgram says.¹³ Former U.S. Department of Education official and mathematician Ze’ev Wurman says Core math standards would graduate students “below the admission requirement of most four-year state colleges.”¹⁴ Coincidentally, one of the two Common Core lead writers in mathematics, Jasonimba, told the Massachusetts board of education this is true,

⁷ “Is the Common Core Just a Distraction?” Eric Hanushek, *Education Next*, May 9, 2012: <http://educationnext.org/is-the-common-core-just-a-distraction/>.

⁸ “One Size Fits None,” Jay Greene, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, April 11, 2010: <http://jaypgreene.com/2010/04/11/sandy-and-jay-on-national-standards/>.

⁹ “End It, Don’t Mend It: What to Do with No Child Left Behind,” Andrew J. Coulson and Neal McCluskey, Cato Institute, September 5, 2007: <http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/Pa599.pdf>.

¹⁰ “Invited Testimony on the Low Quality of the Common Core Standards,” Sandra Stotsky, Colorado State Board of Education, December 6, 2012: www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/Stotsky_Testimony_for_Colorado.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Common Core Standards’ Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking,” Sandra Stotsky, Heritage Foundation Issue Brief, December 11, 2012: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/12/questionable-quality-of-the-common-core-english-language-arts-standards>.

¹³ Testimony to the Texas legislature, James Milgram, April 14, 2011: <http://www.house.state.tx.us/video-audio/committee-broadcasts/committee-archives/player/?session=82&committee=460&ram=11041410460>.

¹⁴ Ze’ev Wurman and W. Stephen Wilson, *Education Next*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 2012), educationnext.org/the-common-core-math-standards/ (accessed January 9, 2012).

and Common Core graduates students prepared for a non-selective community college.¹⁵ Wurman has particularly criticized that the Core pushes algebra back to grade 9, “contrary to the practice of the highest-achieving nations,”¹⁶ which begin algebra in grade 8. Furthermore, the English Common Core’s appendix claims to show how it compares internationally, but the section purporting to do so constitutes three statements.¹⁷ The math portion’s international comparison consists of half a page and five bullet points, and mentions no countries.¹⁸

Now we turn to the data-tracking portion of the initiative, which is not mentioned explicitly in the standards but which states agreed to expand in conjunction with updating their education standards when they received stabilization funds from the 2009 federal stimulus. In that agreement, which former Gov. Ed Rendell signed in 2009, Pennsylvania agreed to “establish a longitudinal data system” and “improve State academic content standards and student academic achievement standards” according to provisions of the America Competes Act.¹⁹ The relevant provisions establish a database that will track children from preschool through the workforce, assign each child a unique identification number, provide “student-level data” about each child (so not anonymous piles of group information that many schools are used to supplying), include demographic and academic data, track teachers and their student assignments, provide information on students who are not tested, and change state graduation requirements, standards, and tests to align them to post-K-12 demands.²⁰ Pennsylvania’s 2010 Race to the Top application says the state has accomplished all of this, and “By 2013, Pennsylvania’s [student data system] will have the ability to track students from birth to the workforce.”²¹ It also states Pennsylvania is using a 2010 federal grant to expand its database to track more people in more ways.

The National Center for Education Statistics has released an education data model for states to follow when doing exactly that. It includes 416 datapoints on individuals, including invasive subjects like family religion, voting status, bus schedules, medical records, and more.²² “The Education Data Model strives to be a shared understanding among all education stakeholders as to what information needs to be collected and managed at the local level,” the NCES states, and “The Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) project is a national collaborative effort to develop voluntary, common data standards...” Funny, sounds like Common Core.

Three recent changes make this much more invasive. First, state databases are now required to be interoperable with each other and open to the federal government, making them a de facto

¹⁵ Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 23, 2010: www.doe.mass.edu/boe/minutes/10/0323reg.doc.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical subjects: Appendix A,” National Governors Association Center for Best Practices / Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 41: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf. And

¹⁸ “Common Core State Standards for Mathematics: Appendix A,” National Governors Association Center for Best Practices / Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_Mathematics_Appendix_A.pdf.

¹⁹ Pennsylvania State Fiscal Stabilization Fund Application, October 21, 2009: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/statestabilization/stateapps/pa.pdf>.

²⁰ AMERICA Competes Act, 2007 (20 USC 9871), sections (e)(2)(D) and 6401 (e)(1)(A)(ii): <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hr2272/text>.

²¹ Pennsylvania Race to the Top Application for Phase 2 Funding, June 1, 2010, Section C, p. 2: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase2-applications/pennsylvania.pdf>.

²² National Education Data Model, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed May 13, 2013: <https://nces.ed.gov/forum/datamodel/>.

national database.²³ Second, many people who know something about education data believe that it is protected by a federal privacy law known as FERPA, or the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education rewrote that law to say it or any educational agency such as a state or school may share student information with anyone the agency wants, without consulting or notifying parents. So, really, there is no longer much federal student data protection.²⁴

Third, in discussing student data and testing with Bluegrass Institute education analyst Richard Innes, I recently discovered that even what states believe is basic, anonymous data they statutorily must collect about children is easily made personal. In the 1990s, Innes called out the Kentucky department of education for a jump in the numbers of students excluded from taking state tests, which caused higher overall student test scores. To attempt to prove him wrong, the department hired a researcher to extrapolate what scores on state tests the excluded kids would have gotten by pulling their results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. One problem: NAEP scores are anonymous. No problem. Simply by comparing basic demographic data from both tests, the researcher was able to attach student names back onto their original test scores with an 86 percent accuracy rate. This shows anonymous student data is really not anonymous, especially 20 years later with bigger databases, more datapoints, and more people getting access. Innes also calculated the possibility that two people could have the same record if their school district used the national data model. The number of people that would have to be in the system to have a chance of having the same record, if there are only two possibilities for each entry, is 1.9×10^{125} , or 1.7 billion followed by 120 zeroes. This means using an anonymous student ID number essentially provides no data security for families.

Clinical psychologist and cognitive assessment specialist Dr. Gary Thompson reviewed the federal privacy law changes and type of data states are collecting on children under Common Core. “[T]he level of information provided about a particular child is both highly sensitive and extremely personal in nature,” he wrote. Cognitive and psychological assessments of the kind used in schools and mental healthcare have become highly personal and accurate in the last ten years, he writes, and are now used by the CIA, the military, and local law enforcement. He demands professional, outside review of every single item used on the tests given to children under Common Core to ensure child and community interests are protected: “The power granted federal and state education administrators via the regulations of [Common Core] are unprecedented in nature,” he says.²⁵

This is not just true of children’s education records, which states and schools may now sell or give to any company or individual they wish, which eight states have already done with the

²³ “National Databases,” Home School Legal Defense Association issue briefing, March 2013: https://www.hsllda.org/docs/nche/Issues/P/Privacy_National_Databases.asp.

²⁴ “Controlling Education from the Top,” Emmett McGroarty and Jane Robbins, Pioneer Institute/American Principles Project, May 2012: pioneerinstitute.org/download/controlling-education-from-the-top/.

²⁵ “Common Core: A Mental Health Professional & Parent’s Perspective,” Dr. Gary Thompson open letter in response to a request he review Common Core regulations, published March 20, 2013 on <http://www.utahnsagainstdcommoncore.com/common-core-a-mental-health-professional-parents-perspective/>.

private database inBloom.²⁶ It is true of Common Core in general. The last thing U.S. education needs is central control of what children will learn. Common Core is not state-led, rigorous, or internationally-benchmarked, and it poses a grave threat to family, local, and state sovereignty. Pennsylvania should stop pursuing foolish slogans and let families and schools once again determine what they will teach, and how.

Thank you.

²⁶ “K-12 student database jazzes tech startups, spooks parents,” Stephanie Simon, Reuters, March 3, 2013: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/03/us-education-database-idUSBRE92204W20130303>. The article cites nine states who have joined inBloom, but due to public pressure Louisiana has since dropped out.