



Testimony to the South Carolina Legislature's Education Subcommittee in Support of S.604

by Jim Stergios

Thursday, February 16, 2012

Thank you, Chairman Hayes and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to share testimony on bill S.604 this morning.

My name is Jim Stergios, executive director of the Boston-based think tank, Pioneer Institute. I am here to testify in favor of S.604. I am joined by Jamie Gass, director of Pioneer's Center for School Reform should you have questions for either of us subsequent to the hearing.

You may be wondering why researchers from Massachusetts would fly to South Carolina to speak on this bill and share our perspective on national standards and assessments. Like all of you on this committee, and like the many teachers, superintendents and advocates in this room, we care deeply about education and the quality of public school offerings. We care about this country's ability to compete internationally. And we care about the development of our children to be ready both for the workplace and as citizens in a free society characterized by strong state and federal institutions.

I would like to share five concerns about the Common Core national standards and assessments. Importantly, states that have adopted the national standards and assessments have done so without adequate deliberation and without state legislative input. The quality of the standards is mediocre at best. The costs are outrageous. The promotion of national standards and assessments by the federal government is, in fact, illegal. Finally, the implementation of national standards and assessments limits the state's ability to innovate and address underperforming schools with urgency.

Jim Stergios is Pioneer's Executive Director. Prior to joining Pioneer, he was Chief of Staff and Undersecretary for Policy in the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, where he drove efforts on water policy, regulatory and permit reform, and urban revitalization. His prior experience includes founding and managing a business, teaching at the university level and in public and private secondary schools, and serving as headmaster at a preparatory school. Jim holds a doctoral degree in Political Science.

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(1) Timeline. Like South Carolina, the Common Core State Standards Initiative was not on Massachusetts' radar screen in the summer of 2009—and it certainly was not on the radar screens of legislatures around the country. Race to the Top was announced that fall, in the depths of the recession, and it was further announced that states adopting national standards would be viewed favorably in federal funding decisions.

By January 2010, the South Carolina Department of Education filed an application noting that it would adopt the national standards and tests—standards and tests that had not yet even been completed. The states did not know much about what those standards might look like since the first drafts were released in January 2010. That timing is remarkable for two reasons:

The first is that standards development takes time. South Carolina has a long history of developing standards. When states advance new standards, the process of holding public meetings and hearings, which includes developing and deliberating on various drafts, usually requires well over a year. So, in moving the Common Core national standards ahead, either the federal government got really good at on-time delivery—or it hastily produced a deficient product.

The second observation I would make is that it was only possible to complete the process in that timeframe because the decision makers omitted key steps such as open meetings and multiple opportunities for feedback. The Common Core standards development effort excluded key stakeholders whose perspectives usually inform our discussions about the content we teach our children: parents, business groups, community organizations, teachers, and true academic experts.

(2) Quality. In 2010, the Massachusetts Board of Education, without a legislative hearing or vote, discarded our state's best-in-the-nation standards and testing in favor of the weaker quality so-called Common Core State Standards Initiative and yet to be developed national testing. Prior to that vote, Pioneer Institute conducted four independent evaluations comparing the proposed national standards to state standards in states with the highest standards in the country. In every case, our experts found Common Core to be of lower quality.

Ze'ev Wurman will speak about its weaknesses in math. Let me make two brief comments on Common Core and literature. Massachusetts, like South Carolina, has a rich literary history. Massachusetts' improvement on national and international tests of English language arts is in great part related to having our teachers focus on literature. Common core cuts literature by more than half in Massachusetts.

First and foremost, reading literature requires the acquisition in a compressed timeframe of a richer and broader vocabulary than non-fiction texts. Vocabulary acquisition is all-important in timely development of higher-level reading skills. Also, English teachers are trained not to teach Federal Bank reports, or computer and other manuals. They are people steeped in the love of language and literature. Asking an English teacher to teach one of Microsoft's software development manuals is really not going to work out well.

(3) Legality. We released a research paper last week written by two counsels general (one lead and one deputy) for the US Department of Education who have analyzed the federal department's policies in promoting and funding the development of national standards, tests, curricular materials and instructional practice. These two distinguished attorneys note that the US Department of Education is likely violating

three federal laws that prohibit the control, supervision, or direction of standards, tests, curricular materials and instructional practice.

Moreover, the authors note that conditional waivers to the No Child Left Behind Act that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is offering have never been approved by Congress. Past secretaries of the federal department of education have granted waivers, but never with a unilateral, material change to federal law.

(4) Cost. Many have criticized the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the 2010 federal health care law) due to the legislative process and the estimates of cost issued by the Congressional Budget Office. To critics of that law, I would say that at least the PPACA had congressional approval—and at least the PPACA came with congressional cost estimates. In the case of national standards and tests, we have neither.

Next week, we are releasing a study on the cost to the country of implementing Common Core standards and tests, and all the computer acquisition, professional development, instructional materials, and ancillary activities associated with them. Our estimate is that it will cost nearly \$16 billion. At least 90 percent of that is to come from states and localities, if history is any guide.

(5) Innovation. The Common Core requires that states adopt the standards verbatim. It then allows states to add 15 percent to the content. However, the national assessments will not cover that additional material. Any time a state seeks to change a strand in the standards or change the test, it will have to get support from the US Department of Education and 45 other states. If a parent has an issue with the standards, you will have to suggest that they call a federal 800 number and wait who-knows-how-long for

an answer. You, as their legislator, will have no ability to help them out.

Why would anyone leave innovation up to the federal government? What does “innovation” mean when one actor (the federal government) has monopoly control over the standards? What does innovation mean when there is no longer a competition among states?

As states, we have led the way in education reform. We have made steady gains over time in a way that, frankly, is not seen from the federal government. We as states innovate. If Massachusetts is rightly proud to have advanced charter schools and high English language arts standards, South Carolina is known for charter schools as well as high standards in US History — and most significantly to all states, South Carolina has led the way in developing what are considered the best history standards in the country. Why give up that control over innovation to the federal government?

The Way Forward

Texas, Virginia and handful of states have said “no” to Common Core national standards and tests. Virginia, like South Carolina, had invested years improving its standards and tests; it determined that adoption was not necessary. Old Dominion conducted an analysis of the quality of the national standards, and realized that its own state standards were a higher quality product.

Texas, too, had invested a lot time and money in developing standards and tests tailored to its own needs. But the Lone Star state took the opportunity of the Common Core to respond in a way that I find encouraging. Texas reviewed the Common Core standards and found that in math, its own standards fell short in a few areas, but that the Common Core standards were in fact not what they were aiming for. Texas wanted to aim

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for excellence. Consulting with top academicians in the U.S. and taking note of Singapore’s much-vaunted standards, Texas re-designed its state standards. Today, Texas not only has excellent English standards but also has among the best math standards in the country—far stronger than the Common Core.

South Carolina has rigorous US history standards and high-quality state standards. Saying “no” to Common Core is a matter of good judgment—but I would urge you additionally to use the opportunity of this debate to move forward with positive improvements to the Palmetto State’s standards and assessments.

About Pioneer

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



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