

**ORAL STATEMENT OF GREG JONES  
PRESIDENT & CEO, STATE FARM GENERAL INSURANCE (RETIRED)  
CHAIRMAN, CALIFORNIA BUSINESS FOR EDUCATION EXCELLENCE  
CHAIRMAN, CALIFORNIA BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE**

**BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**APRIL 29, 2009**

**STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH  
COMMON ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McKeon, Members of the Committee. Good morning. I am Greg Jones, most recently retired after working 40 years for State Farm, and currently Chairman of both the California Business Roundtable and its education arm, California Business for Education Excellence.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the critical issue of common academic standards.

Since I approach this issue from a business perspective, I want to share a few facts about my former employer, State Farm Insurance. The company operates in every state and thousands of communities across the U.S. and Canada. State Farm has always prided itself on, and been recognized for, the caliber of its workforce. This is no accident. In order to be considered for a position, every applicant must first pass an entry level skills test. That test, the job descriptions, and the work expectations are the same in Illinois where State Farm is headquartered as they are in California where I currently live.

The company needs people with strong computational, analytical and communications skills measured consistently regardless of what part of the country in which they are employed. Consistently high standards are critical because employees, like many students, often move from state to state. Today's students are tomorrow's workforce and they must compete with their peers worldwide. We must benchmark our standards internationally to enable businesses to compete in a global economy.

We are not only concerned about the caliber of State Farm's workforce. The company is also concerned about the need for customers to have the analytic skills to make wise choices about insurance products. And as taxpayers, State Farm and other companies understand the return on investment that comes from a quality education. That is why State Farm has made a long-term commitment to ensuring that education policies and practices result in high expectations, high standards, and high quality teachers for all students – no matter where they live.

On a personal note, having two sons who attended schools in five different states because of my job transfers from one insurance office to another, I've witnessed firsthand dramatic differences in the rigor

and quality of standards and the expectations that teachers had for my kids. And while my kids were fortunate to attend good schools, we as parents had to make sure that whatever our kids were learning in whatever school they were attending was of a quality and caliber of rigor to adequately prepare them to succeed in college. My kids were fortunate to have two parents who intervened on their behalf. My point is that expectations for excellence should not depend on luck or where you live because many of our nation's kids are not as fortunate as my own.

My experience with California education policy (full disclosure – I'm also a member of the California State Board of Education but I am not representing the Board today) also sheds some light on the topic of today's hearing. As many of you know, if California was a country, its economic engine would be the fifth largest in the world. According to Achieve and other respected organizations, California has high quality and rigorous standards. Yet, we continually face legal and legislative challenges to lower our content standards and make our state tests easier. Watering down our standards and lowering our expectations might result in a higher number of meaningless high school diplomas, but how would that help the students who will have to compete with in-state, out-of-state and international peers? There are three important lessons from California's experience:

- First, it's not enough to have excellent standards. Aligned tests, meaningful accountability and high-quality instruction are also critical.
- Second, holding all students to the same expectations and reporting results publicly reveal disturbing achievement gaps based on race and economic levels.
- And third, we have data that demonstrates irrefutably that these achievement gaps can be closed without lowering standards or expectations to meet them.

As a result of my experience in business and also as a parent, I take the following approach to the question of whether common academic standards can strengthen America's competitiveness – YES, IF....

YES, IF every student is held to the same high expectations.

YES, IF the common core – starting with reading, writing, math and science – leave time for students to learn other critical content and skills. However, all additional standards must be commonly excellent; they must NOT become commonly mediocre in order to reach consensus on a common core of academic standards. They need to be benchmarked against the best nationally and internationally.

YES, IF everyone understands that common standards are necessary, but not sufficient. They will not result in any improvement without aligned tests, real accountability and high-quality instruction for all of our kids.

What's the best way to get the best common academic standards? That's both a substantive and political question. In business, we benchmark best practices and then we do it. But I realize that the Nike "Just Do It" slogan is not the way the education policy world works!

Ed Rust, the CEO of State Farm, is on the Achieve Board, and the Governors and CEOs on that Board have concluded from past history that a top-down, federal approach will not produce a quality product or a politically acceptable result. There's already a bottom-up process underway led by the states to develop common state academic standards, and Secretary of Education Duncan is seriously considering using the Race to the Top Fund to provide incentives for states to collaborate on the development of common standards and tests.

Common state academic standards will strengthen U.S. competitiveness and individual success:

- if states commit to rigor and quality;
- if federal funds only support states committed to rigor and quality;
- if teaching and instruction are aligned to high quality common standards and tests; and
- if students receive the instruction and inspiration they need to graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and work.

If standards are watered down, or individual states refuse to join the common state standards effort, we will not succeed in creating the globally competitive workforce of tomorrow.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.