



FORMAL TESTIMONY

**“IMPROVING OUR COMPETITIVENESS:
COMMON CORE EDUCATION STANDARDS”**

Before the

Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
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By

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Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to share with you a local school board perspective regarding the implications of common core standards. I currently serve as Vice-President of the St Mary's County, Maryland Board of Education, and I am in my ninth year.

St. Mary's County is located at the southernmost tip of Maryland, 60 miles south of the nation's capital. We are best known for our world class technology corridor that supports the operations of the Patuxent Naval Air Station (NAS). We have over 17,000 students enrolled and supported by over 2,000 teachers. At St. Mary's County Public Schools we are committed to improved student achievement. Student performance on the Maryland School Assessments in Mathematics, Reading and Science is in the top quartile and outranks state-wide data in every grade level assessed. In reviewing alternate Maryland School Assessments for the 2008-2009 academic year, our students continue to rank in the top quartile, and exceed the Maryland-wide performance in each grade level tested.

Additionally, we have implemented a broad range of innovative programs to prepare our students for the highly competitive 21st century workforce through a unique program of study emphasizing the core areas of mathematics and science with an infusion of technology and engineering. This STEM program is offered to all SMCP students and housed at three schools: Lexington Park Elementary School, Spring Ridge Middle School, and Great Mills High School. The proximity of these three schools to the Patuxent Naval Air Station and the technology corridor make them ideal sites.

I share this pride to demonstrate that our school district remains committed to improved academic achievement for all students. My colleagues on the St. Mary's County school board as well as other school boards throughout the state recognize the importance of rigorous academic standards to ensure that students enrolled in our public schools are competitive in the global society. With the passage of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)* and the accompanying *Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund*, and the proposed Innovation Grants - we will be able to further intensify our efforts.

As you are aware, research indicates there is strong consensus among state education officials and local school board members to ensure rigorous standards, strong curricula aligned with those standards, and valid and reliable systems of assessments that fairly and accurately reflect the performance of students, schools and school districts. With respect to common core standards, we believe that such standards should be developed by states individually or collectively by groups of states to achieve this goal.

We also recognize that in order to further ensure global competitiveness the federal government must play a role. However, the federal role must be one of partnership and support to states – not only in terms of funding for those students with the greatest needs, but also in serving as a clearinghouse to share and promote best practices regarding actions to overcome shortfalls in student achievement. Additionally, we believe that the federal government should increase incentives to states and local school districts to create constructive remedies, and provide technical support to the states to assess those state standards.

In order to better understand what specific role the federal government should play related to state-led common core standards, consistent with the Resolutions adopted this year by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) Delegate Assembly, we believe the federal government should:

- support state and local efforts to provide students with an education that is appropriately focused on the skills and uses of knowledge needed for success in the global and technological world of the 21st century by funding multiple education entities, including regional education entities, to develop model standards for voluntary adoption for those purposes;
- support 1) funding for research; 2) financial assistance to states or groups of states, when requested, to assist them in developing and implementing standards around the skills and uses of knowledge that students will need in the 21st century; and 3) direct financial assistance to states or groups of states, when requested to assist them in developing and implementing content standards; and
- ensure that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and international tests do not exceed their current use to provide comparative data through sampling and oppose requiring or coercing the use of these standards by states in developing their own standards for high stakes accountability purposes.

Additionally, we, as other local school boards across the State of Maryland:

- oppose efforts to make the aforementioned activities mandatory on states or local school districts or as a condition for the receipt of other federal aid; and
- oppose efforts to involve the federal government directly or indirectly (e.g. through an entity over which it can exercise control) to develop mandatory or model national content standards or to mandate the development of common content standards among groups of states.

We will continue to support state-led common core standards that include sufficient flexibility in operations to effectively and efficiently address the unique challenges of local communities.

We are well aware of the ongoing efforts by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (NGA/CCSSO) on common core standards. We are aware that, with the exception of Texas and Alaska, the states have entered into a memorandum of understanding signed by the Governor and state superintendents declaring their intent to adopt common standards in language arts and mathematics within three years. We are also aware that draft common standards were released that define the knowledge and skills students should have to succeed in entry level, credit-bearing, academic college courses and in workforce training programs.

We join the National School Boards Association in applauding the work of the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers for their work in assembling an important first step - the *Draft Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics*. We believe that the groups have brought clarity to a widely varied and disparate set of state standards.

However, we do have some reservations with what appears to be greater coercion from the federal government in adopting such standards. As an example, the Department of Education's \$4.35 billion *Race to the Top* program will award competitive grants to states that have worthy school reform plans – including the adoption of college and career ready common standards developed by a substantial number of states. This *Race to the Top* component effectively would favor states using the CCSSO/NGA common standards. Additionally, the proposed requirements for Innovations Grants recently released by the Department of Education suggest support for similar consortia addressing assessments.

Further, this proposed expansion of the consortia-driven concept to the adoption of assessments raises serious questions that will have to be sorted out. For example, should there be a common assessment or should individual states or groups of states develop their own? If there is a common assessment, who should develop it? What will be the grade by grade timetable for phasing in the changeover? What will be the resource needs of local school districts, such as technical assistance and funding for professional development, curriculum alignment, new course material and new reporting requirements? How will school districts and schools be held accountable during the transition as test scores are likely to be negatively impacted as teachers and students adjust to the changes? After all, as good as standards and assessments are, they won't have the desired effect unless school districts have the capacity to implement them and have a fair chance. These questions are only the tip of the iceberg.

How this nation deals with standards and assessment is a major policy issue. Such proposed federal requirements, in our view, would enlarge the federal role and its relationship to the state and local levels. Our concern, like many local school boards across the nation, is that the effort to date is being led by the executive branch without the specific level of legislative direction that would ordinarily be expected for measures of this magnitude. We believe that this system of common standards and any proposals for a system of voluntary assessments must remain voluntary.

In addressing standards, St. Mary's County, Maryland Board of Education urges you to keep in mind that it will be only at the local level, with local school boards, administrators and teachers working together, that we establish clear goals aligned with a broad and rich curriculum and instructional plan, and a climate fostering student achievement, that real progress will be made.

In summary we support:

- the notion of common core standards voluntarily developed by groups of states (as distinguished from, and preferable to, a national/federal entity);
- federal funding for the activity, provided it is not in the nature of a mandate or coercion (such as a condition for receiving grant in aid funding for say ESEA Title I);
- individual states or groups of states developing assessments for common standards but oppose a national test;
- the NGA/CCSSO process and the progress it has made on standards to date with our full support pending the ultimate outcome; and
- any other valid process undertaken by other groups of states.

Finally, we want you to know that NSBA, representing local school boards through their state school boards associations, has also been clear in working with the NGA/CCSSO project and in its official comments on the *Race to the Top* requirements that local school districts will need to have the capacity to successfully implement the standards. This means both funding and technical assistance for professional development, as well as curriculum and course material alignment.

Additionally, NSBA has also been clear that during the year of implementation, transition accountability rules will need to apply, recognizing that test scores will likely be lower in the adjustment year. This will especially be true if the current NCLB framework is still in place.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.