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Why Race to the Middle? Massachusetts and California K-12 State Standards Far Exceed National Standards Drafts

BOSTON/SAN FRANCISCO – A day after President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan laid out an aggressive plan to expand federal control over K-12 academic standards at the National Governors Association (NGA) winter meetings, a new report criticizes the national standards process as “opaque” and the federal push harmful not only to states with existing high standards but to all states that want its students adequately prepared for authentic college level work.

[*Why Race to the Middle? First-Class State Standards Are Better than Third-Class National Standards*](#), jointly published today by Pioneer Institute in Massachusetts and Pacific Research Institute (PRI) in California, is authored by Ze’ev Wurman, a Silicon Valley executive active in developing California’s standards and assessments in the mid-1990s, and Dr. Sandra Stotsky, a current member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education who in the late 1990s oversaw the creation of Massachusetts’ nation-leading state curriculum frameworks in the English language arts, mathematics, science/engineering, and history and social science.

[*Why Race to the Middle?*](#) critiques the draft K-12 mathematics and English standards set forth by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), which was formed in 2009 by the NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) with the encouragement of the U.S. Department of Education (USED), to negotiate standards among all states. They were to be for voluntary adoption by all the states. Yesterday, President Obama and Secretary Duncan made clear that they would now tie Title I funds for K-12 schools to coerce states to adopt the CCSSI proposed standards.

“With the façade of voluntary adoption gone and this looking more like a federal takeover of educational standards, Massachusetts and other states that have gotten their acts together over the last 15 years have a choice to make,” says James Stergios, executive director of Pioneer Institute in Massachusetts. “Since education reform, Massachusetts and its localities have invested \$90 billion in our schools; the feds not even hitting 10 percent of school spending. We implemented hard-won reforms centered on our liberal arts-rich academic frameworks. Why would we give that up – why would we give up leading the nation on national assessments and college entrance tests, and competing with the best nations in math and science to line up behind standards that look more like West Virginia’s than the nation’s best?”

[*Why Race to the Middle?*](#) finds that:

- The process for developing national standards was flawed, marked by highly questionable choices for the Standards Development Work Group, the Validation Committee, and especially the Draft-Writing Committees;
- CCSSI’s College- and Career-Readiness Standards are not internationally benchmarked.

- The various grade-level math drafts cannot lead to college-readiness in math by grade 12, as they teach fewer topics, place needed topics in the wrong grades, and dumb down needed stepping stones for college success;
- The various grade-level ELA drafts cannot lead to college-readiness in English language arts by grade 12, as they often do not show much increase in difficulty from grade to grade; run the gamut from developmentally inappropriate to unintelligible; fail to specify the substantive content needed for developing skills, and too often are not academic standards at all but rather expressions of skills or teaching strategies.

Similarly weak standards have been implemented in places like Connecticut and West Virginia, with poor results for students. Students in the nation’s higher-performing states, such as Massachusetts, California, Texas, Minnesota, and New Jersey have the most to lose. The authors state that “CCSSI, so far, is producing grade-level K-12 standards that are one to two years behind those of high achieving countries.”

“This new study underscores the serious pitfalls of the current headlong effort of the Obama administration to push states to adopt common, i.e. national, standards,” said Lance Izumi, Koret Senior Fellow and Senior Director of Education Studies at the Pacific Research Institute. “The drafting process has been opaque and the draft standards are not well written or sufficiently rigorous, which is especially disturbing for states like California and Massachusetts that already have high standards,” said Izumi. “California went through a very transparent and deliberative process to adopt its rigorous standards, so it would be tragic if these well-functioning and highly praised state standards were replaced by academically inferior national standards.”

“Based on an analysis of the drafts and the process used to create them,” write Wurman and Stotsky, “this White Paper concludes that CCSSI’s initiative has so far failed to produce standards that promise to improve both the education of all American students and America’s competitive position in the global economy. Put simply, Common Core College Readiness will not get you into college.”

[*Why Race to the Middle?*](#) finds that the rush to move from 50 state standards to a single set of standards for all 50 states in less than one year, as well as the lack of transparency in CCSSI’s procedures, have excluded the kind and extent of public discussion merited by the huge policy implications of such a move.

Each state board of higher education must ask the math and English faculty at its public colleges and universities, especially those who teach freshman courses, to review the “public comment” draft from CCSSO, due to be released in March, and present their comments directly to the board, the Governor, and the state legislature. High school math and English teachers in each state, especially Massachusetts and California, need to compare their current standards with whatever appears in the March “public comment” draft and let their governors, Congressional representatives, state legislators, and state boards of education know if its standards are as good as or better than their current standards.



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