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Pioneer Seeks Freedom of Information to Ensure Accountability and Transparency in Education Reform

BOSTON – Pioneer Institute has submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education (EOE) for any and all communications relating to Massachusetts’ policy deliberations and decision-making involving the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). In 2009, Governor Deval Patrick and Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell Chester announced that the Bay State would participate in the CCSSI, which is an effort to establish national standards for K-12 public schools.

The request is designed to ensure that all state-level education policymaking and deliberations are publicly transparent and accountable. The FOIA covers two organizations that are leading the CCSSI project: the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Their members are comprised of public officials; their operations are funded in large part through public money paid in the form of dues. CCSSI is part of the United States Department of Education’s federal Race to the Top (RTTT) contest. Other non-governmental organizations are also heavily involved in the CCSSI project: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a major sponsor of the project, and Achieve, Inc., as a principal advocacy organization.

The CCSSI project has the potential to make major, unilateral Executive Branch revisions to education policy as it has been known since the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA). It may also substantially alter state standards and assessments mandated by the MERA law.

“Given the potential effect on law and policy, it is really odd that Massachusetts’ participation in CCSSI has been approved by neither our state legislative bodies nor the Board of Education,” said Pioneer Institute Executive Director Jim Stergios. “Taken together with the fact that the national standards are being pushed by two trade organizations, which are not publicly accountable, we’ve got no transparency on how decisions are being made. This FOIA request is meant to shed light on how a national policy, with far-reaching impact on state policies across the country, is being developed.”

Specifically, Pioneer seeks correspondence between Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell D. Chester, Chairwoman of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) Maura Banta, Education Secretary S. Paul Reville and the full staffs of the DESE and Executive Office of Education. Pioneer also seeks e-mails between Massachusetts state officials and the United States Department of Education, as well as the other entities responsible for the CCSSI, including the two organizations whose membership is comprised of public officials and receive public money in the form of dues, and the non-governmental organizations closely connected with the CCSSI. The material requested is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations and activities of government.



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