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National Standards Still Don't Make the Grade Academic Standards in Massachusetts and California Remain Significantly Better Than the Proposed Common Core Standards

BOSTON/SAN FRANCISCO – Adopting the final draft of proposed national education standards in English language arts (ELA) would result in a significant weakening of the intellectual demands placed on Massachusetts and California students in language and literature, according to a review published jointly by the Pacific Research Institute and Pioneer Institute.

In [Part I of *National Standards Still Don't Make the Grade: Why Massachusetts and California Must Retain Control Over Their Academic Destinies*](#), authors Kathleen Madigan, a senior research scientist for AccountabilityWorks in Washington, D.C., Sandra Stotsky, a professor at the University of Arkansas and a member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and Ze'ev Wurman, a Silicon Valley executive active in developing California's standards and assessments in the mid-1990s, write that the proposed national ELA standards score an overall 2.7 on a 0-4 scale, while Massachusetts' current standards and proposed revisions to them rate an overall score of 3.9 and California's a 3.4.

“Common Core has made strides compared to its earlier drafts,” said Pioneer Institute Executive Director Jim Stergios. “Its standards probably now compare favorably to those in a majority of states. But if you're sitting on top of the mountain like Massachusetts is, it's still a long way down to what is being proposed.”

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is scheduled to vote on whether to adopt the national standards or proposed revisions to the existing standards this Wednesday. In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has appointed a commission to advise him on the strength of the proposed standards compared to what is currently in place in California.

“The findings of this analysis should give pause to those in California and in other high-standard states who want to rush to adopt the Common Core national standards,” said Lance Izumi, Koret Senior Fellow and Senior Director of Education Studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

Last year, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers agreed to sponsor the Common Core State Standards Initiative, with encouragement from the United States Department of Education (USDOE) and support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to develop common math and ELA standards that states could voluntarily adopt. USDOE subsequently included adoption of the standards among the criteria for states vying to earn federal “Race to the Top” education grant funding.

Common Core has developed both “college- and career-readiness standards” for common high school tests to determine student preparedness for college-level work, and K-12 math and ELA grade-level standards that are the grade-by-grade translation of the college- and career-readiness standards.

The authors find the gulf between the Common Core and current Massachusetts and California ELA standards particularly large in the following areas:

- Specificity of literary cultural content (for example, current Massachusetts standards specify the study of American poetry, drama and fiction from all literary periods in 11th grade)
- Coherent grade-by-grade progressions
- Allowing teachers to stress literary studies more than informational reading at the secondary level
- Developing strong vocabulary knowledge and dictionary skills
- Clearly addressing oral and written conventions like sentence structure, spelling and punctuation
- Illustrating growth in writing with reference to rated (not just annotated) examples at each grade level

Adopting new standards would have an expensive ripple effect across hundreds of districts and thousands of schools. Student assessments, textbooks and professional development for teachers would have to be aligned with the standards.

“Massachusetts has spent nearly \$100 billion reforming our schools since 1993, and as a result our students lead the nation and are internationally competitive,” said Stergios. “But now we’re going to ditch our nation-leading academic standards and MCAS test for weaker standards and tests because we want a one-time \$250 million federal grant? It’s putting short-term political gain ahead of kids.”

In addition, with work on national assessments already underway, we know that there has been no talk of making passage of the national assessments a high school graduation requirement, as is the case with Massachusetts’ MCAS tests.

In Massachusetts, adopting the Common Core standards will likely provide an opening for those who have long sought to replace MTEL, the Commonwealth’s teacher licensure tests, with the Educational Testing Service’s less demanding PRAXIS tests.

[*National Standards Still Don’t Make the Grade*](#) is the fourth review of evolving drafts of the proposed national standards that Pioneer Institute and the Pacific Research Institute have sponsored in the last five months. Part II, a comparison of proposed national math standards with existing Massachusetts and California standards, authored by University of Wisconsin Professor Emeritus Richard Askey and Stanford University Professor Emeritus James R. Milgram, is forthcoming.



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