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## **Common Core Standards Still Don't Make the Grade** Former Massachusetts and California Math and ELA Standards Remain Superior to National Standards

**BOSTON/SAN FRANCISCO** – The Commonwealth's adoption of national education standards is again in the news, with the issue debated in a gubernatorial debate this morning and candidate Tim Cahill's reversal yesterday of his opposition to the move.

This summer, Cahill called the decision to adopt the Common Core national standards "one of the most alarming and egregious of the last four years." But speaking yesterday at an event hosted to Associated Industries of Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, he pledged to support the national standards.

Even after multiple drafts, Common Core's final English language arts (ELA) and mathematics standards don't compare favorably those that were until recently in place in California and Massachusetts, according to a review published jointly by the Pacific Research Institute and Pioneer Institute.

In [\*Common Core's Standards Still Don't Make the Grade: Why California and Massachusetts Must Retain Control Over Their Academic Destinies\*](#), University of Arkansas Professor Sandra Stotsky and Ze'ev Wurman, a Silicon Valley executive active in developing California's standards and assessments during the mid-1990s, write that Common Core's mathematics standards don't progress rapidly enough to prepare students to take Algebra I, the key to higher math study, by eighth grade.

"Common Core has made strides compared with its earlier drafts," said Pioneer Institute Executive Director Jim Stergios. "Its final standards compare favorably with those in a number of states. But Massachusetts is not racing to the top nationally; we're already there. Adopting the national standards slows us in the real competition – the one between Massachusetts and countries with the world's best education systems."

"The analyses presented in this White Paper should raise questions about the conclusions drawn by other reviewing organizations—to the effect that Common Core's standards provide a curriculum framework in mathematics and English language arts that is at least as strong as or stronger than what is provided by the California and Massachusetts standards," said Lance Izumi, Koret Senior Fellow and Senior Director of Education Studies at the Pacific Research Institute.

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to adopt Common Core's standards on July 21<sup>st</sup>; California also subsequently adopted them.

Last year, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers agreed to sponsor the Common Core State Standards Initiative and, with encouragement from the

United States Department of Education (USDE) and support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to develop common mathematics and ELA standards that states could voluntarily adopt.

USDE subsequently included adoption of the standards among the criteria for states vying to win federal “Race to the Top” education grant funding. Last month, Massachusetts was awarded a \$250 million grant.

But a number of education leaders question the move. “There are a lot of things that don’t work in state government; education reform is not one of them,” said former state Senate President Thomas Birmingham, one of the authors of Massachusetts’ 1993 Education Reform Act. “This is a high risk move that offers very little reward.”

Former Massachusetts Governor William Weld, another co-author of education reform, agreed, calling the change “a retrograde step.” Weld also fears that adopting the national standards is a precursor to eliminating MCAS. “It would be madness to eliminate the MCAS test,” he said.

Massachusetts recently received a grant to lead a consortium of states in developing student assessments linked to the national standards. In a recent appearance on *The Emily Rooney Show*, testing opponent and leading educational historian Diane Ravitch said, “I admired MCAS... I was very impressed with the high quality of the exam. MCAS exams... involve writing... thoughtful literature and a thoughtful selection of questions.”

Massachusetts Federation of Teachers President Thomas Gosnell told *The Boston Globe*, “Our standards in Massachusetts are clearly higher than what the federal government is proposing. Our students are number one in the nation and the western world, and here we are being asked to sign onto those [national] standards.”

Massachusetts gubernatorial candidate Charlie Baker said, “Hitching our wagon to some to-be-developed-and-vetted-later-on national process for standards and testing is not fair to our students.” Senator Scott Brown has also expressed concerns about Massachusetts adopting the Common Core standards.

Common Core has developed both “college- and career-readiness standards” for national high school tests that would assess 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 Common Core’s standards and Massachusetts’ or California’s own standards particularly large in the following areas:

- Coherent grade-by-grade progressions through high school in both mathematics and English
- Expectations embodied in the content of Common Core’s standards for Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II that are less demanding than the standards in California and Massachusetts and reflect a less rigorous definition of “college readiness”

- Common Core’s replacement of the traditional Euclidean foundations of geometry with an experimental approach to the study of middle and high school geometry that has neither been widely used elsewhere in the world nor considered effective where it has been tried
- Common Core’s aim to teach Algebra I only in high school, at least one year behind the recommendation of the National Mathematics Panel and current practice in both California and our nation’s major international competitors
- Specificity of literary cultural content in high school English

Adopting Common Core’s standards will have an expensive ripple effect, requiring new professional development for teachers and textbooks be aligned with the new standards.

“Massachusetts taxpayers have spent nearly \$100 billion on school reform since 1993,” said Stergios. “But the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education put short-term gain ahead of kids when it voted to ditch our nation-leading academic standards for weaker standards to land a one-time \$250 million grant.”

Adopting Common Core’s standards also provides an opening for those who have long sought weaker teacher licensure tests, such as the many Massachusetts teacher educators and union members who advocate for replacing the Commonwealth’s teacher licensure tests with off-the-shelf PRAXIS tests.



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