

Comments to House Study Committee on the Role of the Federal Government in Education

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Untangling the Issues and Moving Forward

Several issues have become intertwined in this discussion, and we need to sort them out before any conclusions can be reached so we can move forward in a productive way. The complaints center around these areas:

- The standards approval process
- The content of the standards
 - Are they rigorous enough?
 - Are they too rigorous?
 - Are they developmentally appropriate?
 - High school math in particular is often brought up. The State Board adopted integrated Math courses for grades 9-12 in May 2005 – five years before the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards were adopted.
 - Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History
- Impact of Race to the Top on state actions and subsequent requirements

The Process

Those who have not regularly attended State Board meetings and participated in the Department of Education's working groups are unlikely to know just how much time and work went into the Georgia Performance Standards. State Board agendas and supporting documents are archived online back to June 2003. Five years of the webcasts of their meetings are archived online. Anyone who wants to follow the process as it occurred can do so. They have a very thorough and transparent process.

The Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) was developed as required by the Quality Basic Education Act of 1985. By 2001, it had been changed little and was woefully inadequate for the standards-based accountability environment. An audit by Phi Delta Kappa confirmed that it was too broad. It would take 23 years to teach the QCC. The State Board authorized the work to begin on new standards. It took about 2.5 years to get the K-12 Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) in Math, English Language Arts, Science and Social Studies. Content experts were used to write the standards; at times the State Board sent the staff back to the drawing board after comments were received.

At each step, the standards were posted, usually for a 60 day comment period. They were discussed in open meetings. When proposed for adoption, the feedback was usually posted too. There were numerous opportunities for anybody to view them and comment. They were phased in over a five year period. A few years after adoption, the standards were again reviewed. State Board of Education

members are required by state law to have a hearing in their district each year, so they also received feedback this way.

People often ask why education groups did not object when the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards were adopted. We knew where they came from and the process by which they were first adopted here. We were familiar with the organizations spearheading the effort. As noted many times, Gov. Perdue co-chaired the effort of the National Governor's Association; State Supt. Kathy Cox was a leader in the Council of Chief State School Officers; and the state had been working with Achieve on the American Diploma Project since 2006. The timeline looks quick but understanding the process of the underlying standards, familiarity with the groups, strong alignment of the two sets of standards, and the involvement of state leaders made it part of the continuing process of improving public education not some random radical decision.

There has been controversy around what was adopted: standards or curriculum. Part of the confusion probably stems from the fact that our state statute from 1985 refers to "curriculum" so many state documents use that terminology. An effort was made this past legislative session to update the statutory language but the bill did not make it through.

A continuing problem is not with the standards themselves but with professional development, particularly Math. When the Georgia Performance Standards were being developed it was publicly acknowledged that many teachers, especially those in Middle School Math, were not prepared to teach these standards. We would be asking more of the teachers and students than we ever had. A training model was developed but due to costs it was quickly changed to a "train the trainer" model which is usually not as effective.

The Content

I am neither an educator nor a content specialist in Math or English Language Arts, so I cannot speak to this portion of the issue except to say that the process used by the Department – expert working groups, advisory groups, surveys, posting for comment and revising as needed – leaves me confident that if something is off that it can be brought to the Department's and State Board's attention and a decision made about revisions. The surveys sent out and hearings being held can clarify exactly what the issues are so they can be addressed.

This is not to imply that we agreed with everything that was adopted. We did not, particularly the integrated Math, but it was an open, transparent process and remains so. That is the important element.

AP U.S. History has been included in this controversy recently. Advanced Placement courses and exams are produced by the College Board and the state has no control over the content. It has been a priority in the state in recent years to have more students take AP courses and score a 3 or higher on the exam. (The exams are scored 1-5. A 3 or higher earns college credit for the course.) The Georgia Virtual High School was created when a student from Clinch County contacted Gov. Perdue about the lack of availability of AP and other high level courses in his school. The state has appropriated funding to help

students from poor households afford the exams. Organizations “grading” states often consider the number of students in AP courses a measure of how much the state is improving. This course is not part of common core. It is selected by the students and parents voluntarily.

Federal Role

The federal government has been heavily criticized for involving themselves in any way with the standards, particularly with the Race to the Top competitive grant. I would ask you to consider this though: don’t we want federal support for state initiatives? Don’t we want a cohesive effort rather than the patchwork we usually get? Too often new administrations (federal, state, and local) ignore the work done before they arrive and create their own effort whether it complements what’s already going on or not.

In this case, Congress appropriated a large sum for the President and Secretary to use to spur innovation and bring forward new ideas. Whether that was a good idea or not is a separate question. Does it not make sense for them to take into account some of the work underway?

Questions have arisen about how much of what we are doing now was required by Race to the Top (RTTT). It was a competitive grant offered to the states. Georgia applied for it twice, so clearly the Governor really, really wanted it. It was an extensive ambitious plan. At the end of the grant the state could decide which portions if any to continue. About halfway through the grant, however, Secretary of Education Duncan offered a program to waive *No Child Left Behind* and create a different state accountability system. Georgia’s waiver was written to incorporate the work from RTTT. That is why all districts now have to do certain things that previously only the 26 RTTT districts were required to do. Changes to the evaluation system are due to the waiver and subsequent legislation, not RTTT.

The federal government has vastly overreached its authority in education in many ways, and I am glad to see we are moving on to discussing some of those. The *No Child Left Behind Act* was a huge overreach. (The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, first authorized in 1965, is sometimes given a name when reauthorized such as this one was.) For the first time, federal law was creating sanctions for non-Title I schools – schools that received no additional federal funding -- and for school districts. They established a definition of “highly qualified,” required extensive testing, data systems, required almost all students to take the assessments whether it was developmentally appropriate or not (such as special needs students and those just learning English), limited the definition of a high school graduate, and numerous other things. For example, a special needs student that completed the requirements of their Individual Education Plan cannot be counted as a graduate under their definition.

Every policy-making group understands the use of “carrots” to get others to move in the direction the policymakers want. Competitive grants are often a huge carrot. Increasingly funding is going toward competitive grants rather than the Title I and special education students. Congress can appropriate up to 40% of the costs of special education but has never funded more than 18%. None of the requirements for these programs however have been changed. State and local funds largely educate the special needs students but the feds create almost all the rules. This is not to say that these students deserve less, but the federal government has overstepped its bounds in this area.

Federal grants often include regulations in areas that should be a state and local decision such as evaluations. The school lunch program is filled with overreach: what schools charge for lunch (equity in school lunch pricing), setting minimum and maximum calorie levels for lunch, trying to control what products are included in fundraisers, etc. Many students need to eat a healthier diet, but it is not the appropriate role for the federal government to micromanage what food is available on school grounds.

Finally, the U.S. Department of Education and its Office of Civil Rights have gone far outside their authority. They are making up their own rules with little to no basis and adding requirements such as training and reporting. Should you wish specific examples, we will be glad to supply them. They are using guidance and regulations to legislate. Congress needs to take back its job.

Moving Forward

We may not all agree on what qualifies as overreaching, but I believe that we can all agree that it is occurring.

How do we address it?

First, everybody needs to be aware of and respect the constitutional role of the various bodies involved.

Issues with content standards are being clarified through surveys, feedback, and hearings. The Department of Education and State Board can address the changes as needed through their regular process.

I suggest the legislative leadership, the State Superintendent and State Board jointly work with our Congressional delegation and Senators to address issues as they arise, at least make them aware of the problem and ask for their help.

I suggest a coordinated effort to make comments on federal proposals.

If we can have honest discussions, and agree on some action steps, then we have the opportunity to make some positive changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.