

Testimony Before the Georgia House Study Committee

on the

Role of the Federal Government in Education

Jane Robbins

American Principles Project

September 24, 2014

Chairmen Coleman and Rogers and members of the Committee:

My name is Jane Robbins, and I'm a senior fellow with the American Principles Project in Washington D.C. (although I live and work in Stone Mountain). I've spoken with many of you in the past about the threats posed to Georgia educational sovereignty by Common Core and other initiatives in which the federal government is involved, and I appreciate the chance to address you today.

I've spent the past 3 ½ years immersed in the study of the Common Core Initiative – researching it, writing about it, discussing it with experts from all areas (some of whom will speak to you today), and testifying before state legislatures. The Common Core national standards were intended to be implemented as a *fait accompli* before parents or state and local officials found out what they really were, and what the ramifications were for state and local control over education in Georgia. Now that parents, especially, have found out what's going on and have pushed back across the country, the proponents of Common Core have been forced to defend their work. Over the last few years I've witnessed the evolving defenses, which have not always been internally consistent.

During the first two meetings of this Committee, you've heard those defenses. Since your charge is to cut through the misinformation about Common Core, I will focus on things you were told that are in error.

1. The Common Core national standards emerged from a state-led effort, in which the federal government wasn't involved.

One thing I've learned from the Common Core talking points is that whenever someone begins by saying, "The governors got together," whatever follows that phrase will be wrong. This is how the Common Core Initiative came to be.

Slides 1-8

As you can see, this effort began with private, unaccountable foundations in Washington D.C. and elsewhere that decided to impose their vision of education reform on the nation. To

accomplish that, they used private trade associations, the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), which hired more unaccountable people of questionable qualifications to actually write the standards (Dr. Sandra Stotsky and Dr. James Milgram will say more about that later). The fact that a few people from the Georgia DOE may have attended meetings is ultimately irrelevant – they had one vote out of many, if even that, and the meetings would have gone on and decisions made even if no one from Georgia ever showed up. We will never know what happened in these private meetings because we have no access to minutes or other records, if such records even exist. This is not the way Georgia education policy is supposed to be made.

And although it's become fashionable among some former and current officials to claim that this was a state-led effort that was "hijacked" by the federal government, in fact that's not at all what happened. It was never state-led, and the federal government didn't hijack it. Rather, the U. S. Department of Education (USED) did exactly what it was asked to do in the *Benchmarking for Success* report – use federal money to bribe the states to adopt the national standards. The plan worked quite well (until the grassroots revolt began).

Moreover, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his department announced early and often that the federal government was wholeheartedly backing the Common Core national standards.

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In the first meeting, you were also told of "proof positive" that the federal government wasn't involved: because no one from USED attended the Common Core unveiling at Peachtree Ridge High School. Leaving aside the question whether this anecdote is compelling evidence of absence of federal involvement, it was telling that later on in his testimony, this witness answered a direct question from Rep. Jasperse with this clarification: "There was no *official* involvement" by the federal government. That careful terminology tends to cast a different light on things. Which leads me to the second erroneous claim.

2. Adopting Common Core was completely voluntary, and a state didn't have to do so to get a Race to the Top grant.

Common Core adoption was voluntary in the technical sense, but of course, we have to remember what was happening at the time. The country was in deep recession, and here was the federal government offering millions of dollars to states that were afraid of having to lay off hundreds of teachers. Georgia, like most other states, jumped at the money. We did so via the Race to the Top (RTTT) application signed and submitted by Gov. Sonny Perdue and State Superintendent Kathy Cox in January 2010 – two months before even a draft of the Common Core national standards was released in March, and almost five months before the final version was released.

Slides 10-11

You were also told a state didn't have to adopt the Common Core national standards in order to compete realistically for RTTT money. That is false. Here's the proof:

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The number of states that received a RTTT grant without agreeing to adopt Common Core? Zero. Everyone knew Common Core was a requirement, whether or not the words "Common Core" appeared in the application, which is why states like Georgia signed up without even having seen the final version of the standards. It's puzzling why people who know this continue to repeat the erroneous claim that adopting Common Core was optional under RTTT.

When considering the so-called "voluntariness" of adopting the Common Core standards and the absence of federal pressure, consider what recently happened to Oklahoma. Oklahoma is the state that has made the cleanest break from Common Core¹ (compared to Indiana, for example, where the bureaucrats pretended to rewrite the standards but essentially copied and pasted Common Core²). What did Secretary of Education Arne Duncan do when Oklahoma withdrew from the national standards? He stripped the state of its No Child Left Behind Waiver as punishment.³ Any claim that all this is "voluntary" and "state-led" pretty much disappeared with Duncan's vindictiveness. And the current Administration has threatened to tie Title I money to adopting Common Core. "State-led" indeed. Why are states, including Georgia, submitting to this kind of bullying?

And another thing to consider: What if this *had* been a "state-led" initiative? Would that make everything all right? Why should Georgia be ceding any authority over its state education standards to New York or California? Georgia education should be controlled – entirely – by Georgians. Parents and taxpayers have a right to expect that. They should never be told that we can't make changes to our standards because the federal government – or other states -- won't let us.

3. States only had to adopt 85 percent of Common Core, and could revise the standards however they wanted.

This is false. A state agreeing to adopt Common Core had to accept 100 percent of the standards; it could add a little content, as long as that *addition* was limited to no more than 15 percent of that content area.

Slide 12 again

¹ http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2014/06/06/Gov-Mary-Fallin-signs-Oklahoma-Common-Core-ban/5111402077202/.

² http://www.jconline.com/article/20140323/NEWS0401/303230025/Indiana-s-proposed-education-standards-warmed-over-version-Common-Core-expert-says?nclick_check=1.

³ <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/08/oklahoma-common-core-no-child-left-behind-waiver-110421.html>

In a policy brief issued soon after Common Core was released, the pro-Common Core Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education agreed.

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And the creators of Common Core in fact warned states against even the paltry 15 percent addition. Achieve, Inc., the nonprofit spin-off of NGA, encouraged states to avoid exercising independence in this manner, because doing so would defeat the purpose of having “common” national standards:

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If you have states adding things and changing things, you sabotage the mission of having all students nationwide studying and being assessed on the same content, so that you can compare students across state lines.

As for the claim that a state could always change the standards, that was never intended. Again, the point of these national standards was to have all states doing the same thing. And in fact, the Common Core standards are copyrighted by NGA and CCSSO, so they exercise complete control over what happens to the standards – they can nix any changes they don’t like.

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4. It was always understood that Common Core was a floor, and states would “enhance” and “add on.”

No it wasn’t; in fact, as shown by the previous slides, the understanding from the beginning was quite the opposite. This line of defense didn’t emerge until critics such as Dr. Stotsky and Dr. Milgram began pointing out the truly disappointing quality of the standards. The Common Core defenders were unable to counter these quite devastating critiques and therefore resorted to the claim that Common Core is a “floor and not a ceiling.” Of course, if states took that talking point seriously and changed and supplemented the standards at will, the entire point of the standardization enterprise would be lost. Regarding the states, such as Florida⁴ and Alabama,⁵ that claim to have changed the standards, moving commas around and changing the name isn’t the same as changing the standards. And this kind of sleight of hand doesn’t fool anybody.

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http://mynews13.com/content/news/cfnews13/news/article.html/content/news/articles/cfn/2014/2/18/state_board_of_educ.html.

⁵ <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Government/2014/01/18/Alabama-Education-Board-Changes-Common-Core-Standards>.

5. The previous Georgia Performance Standards were a model for the Common Core standards, and the alignment between the two is higher than 85 percent.

Dr. Stotsky, who is the nation's leading expert on K-12 English Language Arts standards, analyzed the previous Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) and compared those standards to Common Core. She discovered that the GaDOE's "crosswalk" between the two was performed in only one direction: to determine if what's in Common Core was also in the GPS. When you look at it that way, the alignment is indeed quite high. But she found that if one performs the crosswalk in the other direction as well – to see if what's in Common Core was also in GPS – which is the correct way to do a crosswalk, there is a huge difference. In fact, as she found by analyzing the two sets of standards in multiple categories, the GPS were much stronger than Common Core.

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The claim of such a high alignment between GPS and Common Core is flatly inconsistent with GaDOE's objection to returning to GPS: They claim we can't possibly go back to GPS without plunging our schools into chaos and wasting all the money we've spent on teacher re-training and new curriculum materials. If GPS were so similar to Common Core, why would it be a problem to go back? Why, in fact, was it necessary to provide teacher re-training, or buy new curriculum? Either the two sets of standards were highly aligned, in which case none of this is necessary and we can easily return to the standards we own and control, or they're not, in which case you haven't been given accurate information.

A quick point about another set of state standards that, according to GaDOE, served as a model for Common Core: Massachusetts. The truth is that the Massachusetts standards were wildly different from, and superior to, Common Core. Dr. Stotsky oversaw the development of the Massachusetts standards and will clarify this in her testimony.

By the way, one GaDOE official told you in the first meeting that Common Core is better than GPS and contains a "high level of rigor." Please ask for a definition of "rigor." You and I think that term means "requires students to study hard and know a lot." Progressive education theorists, such as those at GaDOE, have a different definition:

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If "rigor" is defined in this unorthodox way, it may be true that Common Core is "rigorous." After all, the standards diminish academic content knowledge in favor of developing the "mindsets" that the government (the schools) wants children to have (indeed, some of the young teachers who testified before the Senate Education and Youth Committee last session praised the math standards for not requiring correct answers). But most Georgia parents don't realize that the definitions have been changed. They want their children to learn academic content, not be subjected to another round of discredited outcome-based education. But content-free outcome-based education is exactly what they'll get from Common Core.

6. Most critics of Common Core haven't read the standards and object to poorly chosen lessons and curricular material, not to the standards themselves.

It's true that many parents who object to the Common Core national standards haven't read them, for the same reason they may object to the Affordable Care Act even though they haven't read it. To someone unfamiliar with educational jargon, the standards are gibberish. But these parents, contrary to the tendency of Dr. Barge and others to scoff at their competence, have read the reports from the people who do speak this language. And they've concluded from their research – and from their children's personal experience with the national standards – that Common Core is a very bad thing for Georgia education.

Every expert we've brought here today has indeed read the standards. Two of them even served on the Validation Committee for the standards, giving them a much deeper understanding than that of anyone you've heard from so far. They understand that the bizarre lessons being taught throughout Georgia, and throughout the nation (because these are *national* standards), are not the result of misreading the standards – they are *dictated by* the standards. Especially in math, Common Core is highly prescriptive.⁶

Because of this, the trope that Common Core is “just standards, not curriculum” is misleading at best. The point of standards is to drive curriculum. I commend to you a study written by two former USED officials, entitled *The Road to a National Curriculum*,

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which explains how the federal government through Common Core will be directing curriculum in violation of three federal statutes, not to mention the Constitution of the United States.

Another expert you'll hear from today, Richard Innes, will mention also the point that any set of standards that would allow such so-called “misinterpretation” as we're supposedly seeing is, by definition, a poor set of standards.

So these are a few items of misinformation you've been given. But let's pull back and look briefly at the bigger picture about how conditional federal grants and waivers, like those used to impose Common Core, silence the citizens' voice on state policy-making. To secure those federal favors, many state bureaucrats, state board of education members, and governors are all too willing to conform their views to those of the federal bureaucrats rather than to those of the citizens they supposedly serve.

The role of USED in this matter – which again, came at the instigation of the NGA – is constitutionally incoherent. USED does not interact directly with the citizen, but rather works through state departments of education – if GaDOE agrees to follow federal orders, it gets federal money. This deceives parents and other citizens. What appears to have been a policy

⁶ <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/11/a-new-kind-of-problem-the-common-core-math-standards/265444/>.

decision by a state board or state department of education is often, in truth, a policy implemented at the direction of the federal government. State government loses its integrity.

Do legislative and other policy initiatives originate from the state officials who are shilling for them, or from the federal government? Or, for that matter, do they originate from NGA? Are meetings being called because a governor or other state official wants the meeting, or because the federal government has dictated that it must be done? Are proposed policies evidence-based and the product of thorough consideration by governors and other state officials, or are they unduly influenced by the lure of federal money or relief from federal regulations?

Citizens have the right to these answers, but the answers are not knowable in the context of RTTT. If citizens can't know these answers, then their legislators cannot provide a true check or balance to the executive branch. This renders our constitutional structure a farce.

Our Founders intended that, in addition to Congress, another check on the federal executive would be state legislatures. But state legislatures have been pushed aside with respect to education policy-making. In state after state, the state boards of education have claimed they should have the ultimate responsibility for education policy. But state boards and state departments of education are executive branch players, and if they have no check from the legislature, they become more vulnerable to improper influences – and by that, I mean influences from USED and entities other than the people.

We see this played out in Common Core. Governors and state boards of education from both parties quickly signed onto the national standards before they were even written. But the legislatures were cut out of the process; even education committees didn't get even notice, much less a full briefing, of what promised to be radical changes in education. Now, legislators from both parties are asking about important issues. Why didn't they ask these questions four years ago, before we had gone down this unfortunate road with the national standards? Because they, and their constituents, were shunted aside by the "experts" and the special interests.

We now have policy – and not just education policy – driven by private interests that have a cozy relationship with the federal government. The federal government reduces state executives to supplicants more responsive to it than to the state legislators and citizens. That explains the frustration of the parents and other citizens who – despite being disdained by Dr. Barge and others – are now rightly demanding the return of their constitutional voice in these policy issues. Your work in answering these calls can make that happen, and can reestablish the constitutional balance that prevents special interests from dictating policy. We Georgia parents and citizens deserve to be heard. Thank you.



Origins and Nature of Common Core: Correcting the Record

Jane Robbins
American Principles Project



Genesis



2007



The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli Broad Foundation pledged \$60 million to inject idea of “uniform national standards” into 2008 campaigns.



The Financiers



May 2008

Gates granted \$2.2 million to the Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership to promote national standards.

2008

National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) accepted foundation grants to start the Common Core Initiative and propagate the national standards.



“Gates-led” Rather Than “States-led”



Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

- \$250,000,000 to date for creation and propagation of standards
- Pledged \$350 million more in the next few years to advance CC
- Since 1999 – NGA & CCSSO have received \$100,000,000 to create, propagate and support national standards

“Gates-led” Standards



“It is not unfair to say that the Gates Foundation’s agenda has become the country’s agenda in education.”

Micheal Petrilli, President
The Thomas B. Fordham Institute

Organizations paid by Gates to support Common Core:
The Pearson Foundation, U. S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, the Foundation for Excellence in Education (Jeb Bush), the Fordham Institute, the National PTA, the NEA, the AFT, AASA & hundreds of colleges and universities.



Forty-Nine States and Territories Join Common Core Standards Initiative

NGA Center, CCSSO Convene State-led Process to Develop Common English-language arts and Mathematics Standards

June 01, 2009





"[M]y job is to help you succeed" in adopting
"common national standards."
--U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

Source: <http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2013/06/07/five-people-wrote-state-led-common-core>

"The Department continues to encourage States to work together to develop and implement common internationally benchmarked standards and assessments aligned to those standards"

Source: <http://gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2009-11-12/pdf/E9-27161.pdf> at p. 58437.

Appendix A1: Letter from Governor Perdue to Secretary Duncan



STATE OF GEORGIA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
ATLANTA 30334-0900

Sonny Perdue
GOVERNOR

→ January 8, 2010

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

→ I write to express my full support for Georgia's Race to the Top application.

Thank you for your full consideration of Georgia's application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sonny Perdue".

Governor Sonny Perdue

Appendix A26: Letter from State Superintendent Cox to Secretary Duncan



Office of the State Superintendent of Schools

Kathy Cox, State Superintendent of Schools

 January 13, 2010

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

 We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Race to the Top grant application, as it has truly sharpened our perspective on what we need to do in Georgia to turn around our persistently lowest-achieving schools. Within the last few months, Georgia's leadership has given a

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this unprecedented reform moment.

Sincerely,

State Superintendent of Schools, Georgia

Race to the Top Program Executive Summary



U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20202

November 2009

“Common set of K-12 standards means a set of content standards that define what students must know and be able to do and that are substantially identical across all States in a consortium. A State may supplement the common standards with additional standards, provided that the additional standards do not exceed 15 percent of the State's total standards for that content area.”



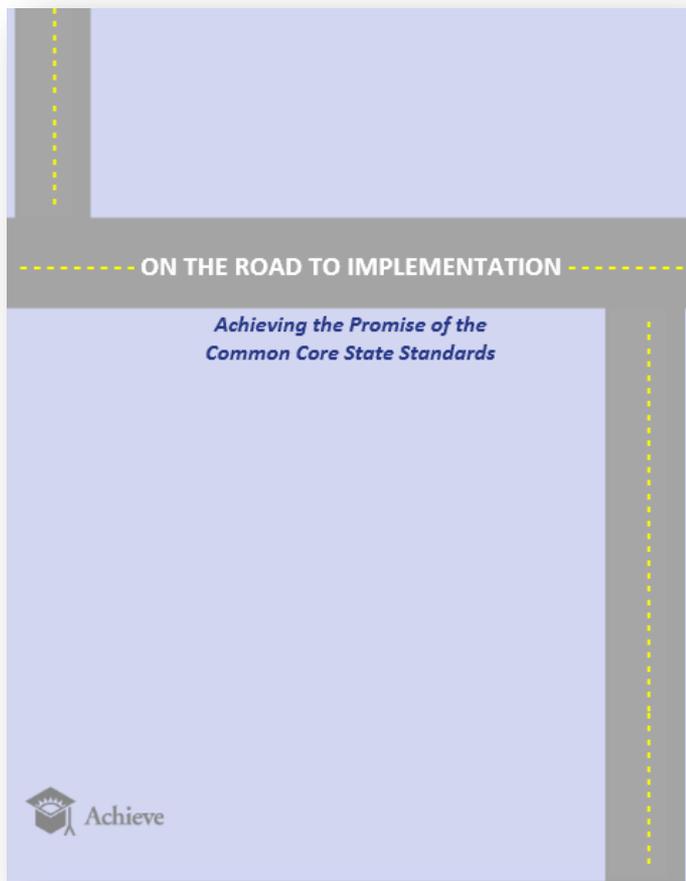


“States that choose to adopt the Common Core State Standards must adopt 100 percent of the standards within three years. This core must represent at least 85 percent of each state’s standards in English language arts and mathematics. Common Core State Standards for science, and potentially other subjects, will be added in the future.”

Source:

http://www.gpee.org/fileadmin/files/GPEE_Policy_Brief_Common_Standards.pdf





States must adopt the standards 100% -- and are discouraged from even adding the paltry 15%.

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This website and all content on this website, including in particular the Common Core State Standards, are the property of NGA Center and CCSSO, and NGA Center and CCSSO retain all right, title, and interest in and to the same.

Source: <http://www.corestandards.org/terms-of-use/>

Comparison of the Common Core and
2008 Georgia English Language Arts Standards
-- Dr. Sandra Stotsky

Table 1: Average Points per Section and Total Average for Both Sets of ELA Standards

	CC	GA
Reading Pedagogy and Independent Reading	3.3	3.6
Value of Literary Study	1	3.6
Organization and Disciplinary Coverage of the Standards	1.7	3.6
Quality of the Standards	1.4	2.4
Total Average	1.85	3.3



“Educational expectations that are academically, intellectually, and personally ambiguous, or contentious [and] that encourage students to question their assumptions”

Source: <http://edglossary.org/rigor/>



The Road to a National Curriculum

The Legal Aspects of the Common Core Standards, Race to the Top, and Conditional Waivers

A Pioneer Institute White Paper

by Robert S. Eitel and Kent D. Talbert

with contributions from Williamson M. Evers