

## Concerning Georgia Public Education and the Common Core

My name is Steven Jonathan Rummelsburg. I hold a degree in History from the University of California, Santa Barbara. I taught Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the California public schools for 23 years and now teach philosophy to high school seniors in Atlanta. I am a writer and a speaker. I regularly give talks on education, philosophy and culture. I write for several online publications such as Crisis Magazine and the Imaginative Conservative, and I also write high school curriculum for the Sophia Institute.

I have been through more trainings in the public schools than I can enumerate here, but of great significance for the purposes of today's testimony, last year I committed to 24 days of intensive Common Core Training in Bakersfield California under the tutelage of nationally recognized Common Core expert Stephen Ventura. Steve Ventura is a man I call friend and he will attest to the same as can be seen by his letter of recommendation. We became close in our 24 days together and we spent much time going above and beyond the training agenda, as I learned as much as I could about the proper implementation of the Common Core. It shouldn't surprise anyone, concerning the nationally standardizing efforts of the Common Core, that my friend Steve Ventura is also training teachers in Georgia. He was the keynote speaker on December 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of 2012, for the Georgia Association of Curriculum and Instruction Supervisors. ([http://www.gael.org/gacis/gacis\\_winter\\_conference\\_2012](http://www.gael.org/gacis/gacis_winter_conference_2012)) His topics included Performance Tasks, Strategies, and Formative Assessments, the very same topics in which we were trained over our 24 days together. Stephen Ventura was also in Atlanta for 3 days for the School Improvement Summit Atlanta Georgia on June 3-5, 2014. (<http://schoolimprovementsummitatla2014.sched.org/speaker/stephen.ventura#.VBXmEhFOxLA>) As well, he is scheduled to fly into Atlanta for Common Core training on four more occasions for this academic year.

In our Common Core training, we became familiar with most of the nationally recognized educational experts promoting the Common Core, but in particular we worked with Larry Ainsworth's book *Rigorous Curriculum Design: How to Create Curricular Units of Study that Align Standards, Instruction, and Assessment*.

I worked alongside colleagues from four other school districts, and we learned the ins and outs of the Common Core as we were trained to use the Common Core Standards to write curriculum and assessments. We brought the fruits of our labors to our colleagues and spent 6 further days trying to convey the aims, conditions and implementation ideals of the Common Core agenda to our colleagues.

These experiences and more give weight to my testimony in a unique way. Due to fear of reprisals against those who dare to disagree with the Common Core agenda, I will give voice to a point of view not often heard, that of the school teacher in the trenches. Rest assured that my voice may be one of the only teacher voices you ever hear, but I know for a fact that there are many teachers very unsatisfied with the Common Core agenda. They are with me in spirit but would not dare speak up in public for fear of reprisal, up to and including the loss of their livelihood.

Today I would like to address three specific considerations introduced by an honest look at the state of public education today. First of all, I will examine the desired outcomes of the public school

educational programs. Second, I will discuss why the Common Core cannot achieve the desired outcomes, and third, I will suggest what kind of educational program will lead to the desired outcomes.

### **Introduction- The plain truth about the state of education today.**

The plain truth about the state of public education in America today is that it is in bad shape. This is nothing new; things have been steadily deteriorating for a few more decades than we might readily like to admit. I have seen firsthand the fallout from this fact. My career as a public school teacher bears testimony to the declining outcomes that are not too hard to measure: declining literacy, declining math ability and declining writing skills.

We ought to call to mind that in 1983, the Department of Education delivered the report “A Nation at Risk.” It was confirmed by that report that our public schools have been steadily declining. The chilling assertion was made that America’s sworn enemy could do no more to destroy us than to foist upon us our current system of public education. This report elicited the appropriate response from educational experts, the mad search for remediation. I began my teaching career in 1990 just as some of the reform efforts were on their way out and new efforts were on their way in. We saw more changes in pedagogy in my first decade of teaching than had taken place throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1998, “A Nation Still at Risk” reported that despite the best efforts of the educational elite, the schools had further degenerated, with the added distressing fact that increasingly ill-educated students were hotly pursued by increasingly ill-educated teachers

Today, in 2014, the degeneration continues even faster than in times past. There is a justified panic to find the remedy. The Common Core grew out of the need to remediate the failing public schools and to get us back on track in the Global Economy. Though the intentions of some of the creators may have been good, it is bound to fail for reasons I hope to elucidate here. It is my sincerest hope that my three points for consideration will give this committee due pause to consider that Georgia public schools would be much better off abandoning the misguided Common Core efforts and returning to sane methods of education. Doing so will get our students back on track to an authentic education and fruitful college and career paths.

### **Part I- What are the desired outcomes of public education?**

Common Core is based on the philosophy that public education has three goals: to create good citizens, to prepare students for higher education and to create good workers for the global economy. Although we might agree that these are fairly reasonable ends, they are very narrow considerations if we consider the intended purposes of an authentic education. There are more important ends the Common Core ignores to the detriment of our students. That is a topic for another day.

On paper, the Common Core national standards claim to inculcate these three ends. However, we must take a close look at the aims, techniques, methods, pedagogy and realistic outcomes that come from implementing a national and all-encompassing program like the Common Core national standards. I will explain how, except for its goal of forcing the entire nation into its camp, Common

Core is not new – its techniques have been tried, and have failed. I will describe how modern pedagogies including the Common Core are not capable of achieving the ends we seek. So while we may all agree that the aims and goals of the Common Core are devoutly to be wished, as far as they go, the Common Core is not the way achieve them.

## **Part II- The Common Core is the wrong approach.**

To begin with, considering the Common Core claims to be a data-driven agenda, it violates its own principles -- because there is no supportable evidence that it will be effective. I encourage you to ask the Common Core proponents to show you the research that supports what they're doing. You won't get much.

To the contrary, I have already seen models of this that have failed miserably. In New York and other such places, we have seen tremendous failings and pitfalls. I myself have unsuccessfully taken a pilot 6<sup>th</sup> grade test aligned to Common Core. It was arbitrary, difficult and ultimately ineffective. My students were utterly lost, and it would hardly be fair to attribute that to a teacher's instruction. The president of an organization that helped create Common Core (Achieve, Inc.) testified that we will have to endure 13 years of the Common Core to see if it works or not- If it doesn't work, which I assure you it won't, what will we say to an entire generation exposed to this educational blunder?

The Common Core, in its drive for uniformity and conformity, foretells the death of one of our greatest assets in this melting pot of a country, that of diversity. We have always drawn our strength and creativity from the pluralism of ideas, various cultural traditions and modes of perspective that are likely to come from many different backgrounds. The Common Core has a leveling effect that suppresses not only diversity itself, but the great gifts that potentially come from that diversity – such as innovation.

The uniformity of the Common Core also thwarts what has made this country great, our rugged individualism. Applying a uniform set of norms and outcomes handed down from On High that ignores the character, culture, social context, geographical and economic differences of vastly different cities, counties, and states is a fatal blow to particular individual potential. How can the distant “experts” who wrote the Common Core possibly hope to release the potential of each unique child?

The national uniformity of the Common Core brings to mind that Ancient Greek villain Procrustes who would lie in wait for unsuspecting travelers and invite them into his cottage for a good night's rest. When Procrustes lured them to his guest bed, he assured them that no matter how tall or short they were, his guest bed would fit them perfectly. Of course this was impossible because all were of diverse sizes, but when they would get into the bed, they would inevitably not fit. If the guests were too short, Procrustes would turn to tortuous devices to stretch them on the rack until they fit the bed, or if they were too tall, he would saw off their limbs. In the end, they fit in the bed, but not before being tortured and eventually killed. The Common Core is like Procrustes' bed. It couldn't possibly fit a nation of wildly diverse students. To try to cram all of our different students and families into the Common Core bed is wildly misguided.

So to summarize, there is no data to suggest that Common Core is a good idea, and it damages our diversity and the rugged individualism that made this county great. But there are two yet far more important reasons the Common Core is a bad idea when it comes to educational reform. First of all, it

does not recognize the true human person as the proper object of education, and second, outcomes-based learning is the wrong model to educate the good citizen to be prepared for college and career. It ends in being Procrustes' bed.

The story of Procrustes illustrates the "one size fits all" nature of the Common Core and points to the central problem with nearly all educational reform in the last several decades. We have lost sight of the proper object of an authentic education. Over decades we have abandoned the understanding of what it means to be human and have overused empirical science to create a substitute definition. What the Common Core aims at in its consideration of education is not a human student, but a bag of molecules treated more as a cog being prepared for a grand economic machine.

The proper object of an authentic education is the human person. As the ancient Greek Philosopher Plato explained, all human persons have three distinct parts that must be considered by all aspects of an education. They have appetites, they have wills, and they have intellects. If all humans have these three faculties, and it is certain they do, then our education must reflect these facts. If it doesn't, we won't properly develop the whole human person, especially those we expect to participate as fully enfranchised citizens and workers in this great land.

The fatal flaw of the Common Core is that it doesn't recognize this full humanity of the student. It treats students as scientifically reduced receptacles for skills and knowledge posited to create, by ingredient combination, the right mixture of elements to meet the employment needs of our society. Because of this fundamental flaw, the Common Core imposes methods that have no hope of achieving the desired outcomes.

The Common Core is being touted as a new thing to remediate the past failures of public education so glaringly pointed out by the "Nation at Risk" reports and so easily observable here in 2014. Though the Common Core certainly appears to be new, it is really just a recycling of many of the past failed programs. The Common Core is the synthesis of all modern educational errors since the 1970's. The only difference is that it is being imposed on a much grander scale. The collective element that is marbled throughout all educational programs from four decades ago and through the central premises of the Common Core is the constructivist model of education known as "Outcomes Based Education."

Outcomes based education is a list of desired outcomes, taking the form of benchmark standards measured by assessments and grounded in the false theory that certain skills must be acquired to achieve the educational ends. But the truth about an education is that it is not a matter of amassing information and skills in order to take and pass an arbitrary test. As the poet William Butler Yeats pointed out, "education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." The Common Core intends to fill a pail. An authentic education is not the science of filling a bucket, but it is an art of cultivation where the fields of the inner landscape are tilled, weeded and prepared for sowing the seeds of truth in order that we might yield an abundant crop at the end of a season of study. Education is not about skills but about developing the human person to recognize truth. This is diametrically opposed by the methods and techniques of the Common Core.

Education can be analogized to agriculture. And there are first things and second things. First things are soil, seeds and roots, and second things are branches and fruits. In an authentic education, one must acquire the liberal arts as tools to prepare the soil of the inner landscape. When the soil is prepared

the seeds of truth must be planted with the guidance of a teacher. The student must tend to the inner landscape by watering, weeding and making sure that the light of truth can shine on the field.

If done properly, soon the seeds will sprout, grow roots and into proper trees of knowledge and then produce fruit. The fruits of this labor are second things. The fruits are what we recognize as acquired knowledge and skills. The fruits are second things and visible to all who stand to observe. The work of the first things is not as easy to see. But Common Core ignores the planting and the cultivation – the liberal arts – and focuses only on the fruits – the “skills.” These fruits, cut off from the field, cultivation and roots, quickly rot.

It has been the desired outcome of the public schools for decades now to inculcate skills. Countless studies demonstrate that students jettison the skills and information we have tried to give them. One of the finest literature professors in history has said that “if you put first things first and second things second, you will get both first and second things; if you put second things first and first things second, you will lose both first and second things.” All of outcomes based education is a matter of putting second things first. And we have decades of data to demonstrate that we have lost both first and second things in the process. The Common Core will only increase habits of forgetfulness, while further bankrupting this great country’s future.

### **Part III- If the Common Core is that bad, what should we do?**

If we reform education in a way that focuses on the roots rather than the fruits, we will achieve the desired outcomes and aims the public schools already have, that of making good citizens as well as career and college ready students. What really needs to happen with public educational reform is counterintuitive. To achieve the desired outcomes we have to abandon the “scientific” approach and adopt a more comprehensive human approach that recognizes the real nature of the human person and utilizes the way of natural learning. In other words, we should return to a classical model that produced many of the most learned, innovative, and yes, wise leaders the world has ever known. This will give employers and universities what they really want – employees and students who are educated rather simply trained in rootless skills.

What does this mean in practical terms?

We must recover the true nature of literacy from the scientifically reduced shadow it has become. The scientization of literacy has reduced it to its lowest elements of decoding and basic recall of facts after a literal reading of a text. This sterile exercise cannot yield the results that universities and employers require from graduates. To begin to recover the true nature of literacy, we must also recover a true sense of grammar which has also become a shadow of its former self.

Next, we need to recover the true nature of critical thinking from the mantra “think for yourself” and return it to the right standard of coherent and logical thinking: “think correctly,” along the path of truth and reality. In the modern definition of “critical thinking,” which Common Core embraces, students are given as a reference point their uneducated selves. But the true goal of critical thinking is to see things as they are and to solve problems based on what is actually there, not what a student may think is there. How do we instill this? By teaching logic and prudence. Employers and professors alike would greatly appreciate workers and students able exercise prudence in their judgments and to think correctly about the right and good thing to do.

Finally, when it comes to speaking and writing, employers and professors would wish that their workers and students would come to them able to communicate effectively. This requires instruction in grammar and logic (which Common Core basically ignores). In addition, our students and future workers need to be well exposed to the best things that men and women have said and done. The texts put in front of our students by way of the Common Core are dreadful examples of good writing and well-ordered prose. We must drastically raise the standard of the literary work we put in front of our students; if not, there will be no models for the excellent rhetoric we need from our college students and future employees.

Concerning Math and the Sciences, time and space do not permit treatment. I would be delighted to consider this topic in another forum if anyone so desires.

### **Conclusion-**

In summary, the state of modern education is dreadful and in dire need of proper reform. And while we are right in desiring that our public schools help our students to become excellent citizens and to be prepared for college and career, the Common Core will not lead to these desired ends. It is the three liberal arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric that are the three perennial arts necessary to acquire an authentic education.

This authentic education is not only the only path to a truly educated citizenry, it is expressly and diametrically opposed of the methods and techniques of the Common Core, which proposes to harvest fruit from nonexistent trees. I warn you today that the Common Core has already failed. I have seen its development, I understand its philosophical and pedagogical roots, I have developed curriculum based on it and seen it implemented as the national directors would have it done -- and it fails our teachers and students alike.

We must return the authority to develop standards and curriculum to local entities who know their students, their geography and their particular culture well enough to meet individual needs without destroying diversity, character and culture. National standards that inevitably lead to a national curriculum are incapable of considering these factors. If we persist on this path and wait 13 years to witness the assured devastation that the Common Core will wreak on our Georgia public schools, it may be too late then for a recovery.