

## Testimony before Common Education Committee

### Oklahoma House of Representatives

October 6, 2011

Madam Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for having me here to testify today. My name is Lindsey M. Burke. I am Senior Policy Analyst for education at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

No one denies that American education has room for improvement. American children ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> in mathematics among the mostly wealthy countries that participated in the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, falling below students in the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Iceland, Estonia, and Slovenia.

In all, just 33 percent of U.S. eighth graders are proficient in math. Moreover, a mere 17 percent of Hispanic students in America are proficient in math along with just 12 percent of African American students.

While U.S. math achievement is troubling, reading scores aren't much better. The United States ranked 17<sup>th</sup> on the PISA, falling behind countries such as Belgium and Estonia. Today, just 30 percent of U.S. students score proficient in reading. And when we examine U.S. subgroups, the outcomes become even more troubling.

Just 13 percent of African American students scored proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) also known as the nation's report card, in 2009; just 16 percent of Hispanic students can read proficiently according to the test. And on international comparisons such as the PISA, black and Hispanic 10<sup>th</sup> graders in America score closer to their peers in Mexico than they score to the average for all their classmates in the United States.

Beyond international comparisons, right here at home, there is ample evidence that American K-12 education is in a state of crisis. Since the 1970s, academic achievement has remained relatively flat. Math achievement for 13-year-old children has increased only nominally, and reading achievement has been completely flat for the past 40 years.

Not only has academic achievement remained flat, but academic attainment – that is, graduation rates – have also been stagnant. Graduation rates today hover around 73 percent, essentially unchanged since the 1970s. Sadly, in many of our nation's largest cities, less than half of all students graduate high school.

And there are other signs that America's education system is failing to meet the needs of millions of students: one-third of students need remedial coursework when they enter college, and the achievement gap between White and minority students, and between low- and upper-income students, persists. And, according to the new *Global Report Card* developed by University of Arkansas researchers, "achievement in many of our affluent suburban public school districts barely keeps pace with that of the average student in a developed country."

These failures have persisted despite significant growth in the federal role in education over the same time period. What began with President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965,

Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the education component of Johnson's War on Poverty.<sup>2</sup> While the idea at the time was compensatory education, that is, providing additional federal resources through federal programs to improve outcomes for poor children, by the end of the 1980s, "education policymakers began to look beyond equity arguments to standards-based reform, also known as a systemic reform."<sup>3</sup>

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush provided grants to several organizations to develop common education standards. The grants came on the heels of a report by the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, a panel of policymakers and education experts, which called for national standards.<sup>4</sup> The standards that were subsequently developed in U.S. History, English Language Arts, and mathematics came under scrutiny for the poor quality of the content. The U.S. Senate voted 99-1 in opposition to the history standards, the Department of Education cancelled its contract with the organizations crafting the English standards, and the math standards were widely criticized for promoting "fuzzy math."<sup>5</sup>

President Bill Clinton signed Goals 2000 into law in 1994, marking the seventh reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Further entangling Washington into the nation's classrooms, Goals 2000 included broad goals as standards framework, and required states to develop standards in reading and English Language Arts.<sup>6</sup>

While Goals 2000 required states to develop math and English standards, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was the first federal foray into testing. Building off of Goals 2000, NCLB now also required states to set standards in science as well as math and English, and began requiring states to test students in math and reading yearly in grades three through eight and once again in high school. And, for the first time, NCLB set a ticking clock on states: by 2014, all students would have to be proficient in math and reading, as measured by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

While No Child Left Behind significantly expanded the federal role in education by putting Washington in charge of setting student proficiency deadlines and by mandating the frequency with which states test students, current efforts by the Obama administration far exceed existing federal overreach, and aim to get Washington into the game of defining the *content* of what students are taught in local schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer A. Marshall, "What Parents Need to Know about 'No Child Left Behind'," Family Research Council, Family Policy, Volume 15, Number 2, March – April 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Bob Rothman, "Common Standards: The Time is Now," Alliance for Excellent Education, Issue Brief, December 2009, at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/TheTimeIsNow.pdf> (October 3, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

"...And I have to tell you, this was not an easy thing to get through Congress. This is not normally how federal dollars work."

"...I want to commend the leadership of the governors and school chiefs who've joined together to get this done. And because of these efforts, there will be a set of common standards that any state can adopt...and I urge all states to do so..."

By **December 2009** Conservatives in Congress began voicing concerns that the Obama administration's support for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA) stated:

"The only common, multi-state academic standards I am aware of are those being developed through the Common Core Initiative. Therefore, it stands to reason that any state wishing to receive funding through the Race to the Top program will be mandated to adopt the Common Core - and to test its students based on those standards.

"In other words, the Common Core is being transformed from a voluntary, state-based initiative to a set of federal academic standards with corresponding federal tests."

On **February 3, 2010**, leaders of the Common Core State Standards Initiative announced that states that have adopted the Common Core standards must use the standards word for word. National Governor's Association program director David Wakelyn stated: "You can't pick and choose what you want. This is not cafeteria-style standards." Council of Chief State School Officer deputy executive director stated that "adoption means adoption." *Education Week* reported that "...NGA and CCSSO officials said that states must approve the entire common-standards document verbatim."

In **February 2010** Education Secretary Arne Duncan told a group of governors that access to the nearly \$15 billion in Title I funding for low-income school districts could also be tied to the adoption of common "college and career-ready" standards.

On **March 13, 2010** Obama administration releases its "Blueprint" to reform No Child Left Behind. The Blueprint suggested renaming the Title I program for low-income children to the "College-and-Career-Ready Students program," and states:

"Following the lead of the nation's governors, we're calling on all states to develop and adopt standards in English language arts and mathematics that build toward college- and career-readiness by the time students graduate from high school. States may choose to upgrade their existing standards or work together with other states to develop and adopt common, state-developed standards."

There was now clear evidence that common standards will be supported in a significant way by Washington, with the inclusion of a requirement for all states to have college-and-career ready standards to receive funding from Title I, the largest pot of money provided under No Child Left Behind.

And most recently, just last month in **September 2011** The Obama administration announced that it would offer No Child Left Behind waivers to states that agreed to conditions stipulated by the Department of Education. The first condition to which states must agree in order to receive a waiver is to adopt national standards and tests. The waiver application of the Department of Education's website states:

taken only math coursework addressing those standards...will be inadmissible to any four-year college around the country.”<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Wurman also points out specific problems with the skills measured by the mathematics standards. Wurman wrote in the San Francisco Chronicle in December 2009:

“They [the mathematics standards] offer more than 100 examples of the mathematics skills expected of students. Here is one: *If everyone in the world went swimming in Lake Michigan, what would happen to the water level? Would Chicago be flooded?*”

Wurman writes that this is:

“An interesting but mostly non-mathematical problem. The math skills measured are estimation and division at the fifth-grade level, but how accurate is measuring even those low-level math skills when the answer depends mostly on non-mathematical knowledge: the Earth’s population; Lake Michigan’s surface area; Chicago’s elevation above the water level; or whether the water will spill over to Lake Huron before flooding Chicago. Out of the 105 examples, almost two-thirds have flaws of one type or another, making them inappropriate as reliable measures of math knowledge. This is deeply troubling, given these standards may shortly be imposed on the whole nation.”<sup>8</sup>

There is also little if any empirical evidence supporting a move toward national standards and tests. Finding extremely limited existing evidence on the efficacy of national standards, in 2009 the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution conducted their own analysis of the relationship between student math achievement at the state level and the rigor of state content standards. Brookings researchers found no statistically significant association between the quality of content standards and student academic achievement. They concluded:

“The lack of evidence that better content standards enhance student achievement is remarkable given the level of investment in this policy and the high hopes attached to it.”

In a subsequent study, Brookings researchers concluded that “...the creation of common standards will have little impact on our future in and of itself.”

Proponents of national standards also frequently argue that nation’s that outperform the United States on international tests of student achievement have national standards. While many of the countries that outperform the United States on international tests have national standards, so do many of the countries that do not outperform the U.S. Countries including Belgium, Australia, and Canada have education

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<sup>7</sup> Williamson M. Evers and Ze’ev Wurman, “Alternatives Needed to Common Core: An Additional Consortium for Common Standards,” Jay P. Greene’s blog, December 11, 2009, at <http://jaypgreene.com/2009/12/11/alternative-needed-to-common-core-an-additional-consortium-for-%E2%80%8Ecommon-standards/> (October 3, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> Ze’ev Wurman, “Common Core standards undermine California’s gains,” San Francisco Chronicle, December 22, 2009, at [http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-12-22/opinion/17353504\\_1\\_math-standards-remedial-classes-years-of-high-school-math](http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-12-22/opinion/17353504_1_math-standards-remedial-classes-years-of-high-school-math) (October 3, 2009)

and testing regime. States should focus instead on supplying clear information to parents about school performance.

If not national standards, how does Oklahoma improve outcomes?

1. Strengthen state-based accountability systems by strengthening state standards and tests;
2. Provide school performance information to parents and taxpayers by publishing state standards and cut-scores in a manner that is accessible to parents; and
3. Empower parents to act on school performance data by offering more school choice options.

### **Conclusion**

The problems that need fixing in American education are rooted in a misalignment in the power and incentive structure of public education. Focusing on the adoption of national standards and tests to define what every child in America will learn distracts from fixing the fundamental deficiencies of our education system: a lack of choice for families and the absence of competition to force schools to improve.

Centralizing standards and assessments will not improve educational outcomes. American education has long prided itself on the principal of local control. And for good reason: those closest to the students know them best.

A half-century of ever-increasing federal involvement in education has failed to increase academic achievement. Relinquishing control of Oklahoma's educational autonomy to distant bureaucrats in Washington by adopting national standards and tests will fail to improve outcomes for children, and will further remove parents from the decision-making process. National standards would strengthen federal control over education while weakening schools' direct accountability to parents and taxpayers.

Moreover, states are far better at adapting and innovating than the bureaucratic federal government. Ten years ago, we could never have envisioned the technological advancements that have taken place, such as the iPad. And we cannot imagine what will take place ten years from now.

I hope Oklahoma will lead the way in improving its own state standards and pushing back against this unprecedented federal overreach into what is taught in your local classrooms.

Thank you.