

May 1, 2014

Governor Mary Fallin  
Oklahoma State Capitol  
2300 N. Lincoln Blvd., Room 212  
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Dear Governor Fallin,

It has come to our attention that some opponents of the Common Core State Standards Initiative have misrepresented our position, and we would like to correct the record. We at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute strongly support the implementation of these college- and career-ready standards, in Oklahoma and elsewhere. We believe that reverting to your old English and math standards would be a significant mistake.

As you know, the Fordham Institute is a conservative education-policy think tank with deep roots (and offices) in the state of Ohio. I served in the George W. Bush Administration, along with our trustee Rod Paige, the former U.S. Secretary of Education. Chester E. Finn, Jr., our president and founder, served in the Ronald Reagan Administration alongside Secretary of Education Bill Bennett.

In 2010 we evaluated both the Common Core standards and the standards in place in Oklahoma and the other states. While we found Oklahoma’s English and math standards to be relatively solid, they failed in significant ways too—and these failures make them incompatible, we believe, with college and career readiness:

1. **Few objectives were devoted to informational texts**. This is a problem for two reasons. First, informational texts—otherwise known as nonfiction—allow students to gain important content knowledge that will allow them to become proficient readers. It’s this focus on content knowledge that is one reason we (and Core Knowledge founder E.D. Hirsch, Jr.) are such strong supporters of the Common Core. Second, research demonstrates that many students struggle in college because they have not had enough exposure to informational texts in the K–12 system; addressing that preparation gap is a major goal (and success) of the Common Core. What’s more, Oklahoma’s old standards were neither detailed enough about the literary genres students should read nor demanding enough in terms of studying America’s foundation documents.
2. **There was no guidance about assigning students challenging, complex texts**. Another strong point of the Common Core is that it expects students to read intellectually demanding fiction and nonfiction texts as they make their way through the K–12 system. This has paved the way for higher expectations at every grade level, as teachers push students to tackle tough reading assignments rather than stay within their comfort zone.
3. **Oklahoma’s old math standards did not require the mastery of standard algorithms**. The cornerstone of the “fuzzy math” that so many conservatives rightly abhor is the notion that students should be able to use “multiple strategies” to solve problems rather than learning the standard algorithms for addition, subtraction, multiplication, and so on. Yet that’s precisely the approach that Oklahoma’s old standards took.
4. **Perhaps most egregiously, Oklahoma’s old standards suggest the use of calculators as early as first grade**. We now know from solid research that young students must develop fluency with arithmetic; the use of calculators is a major impediment. That’s why the Common Core saves the use of calculators until the late elementary grades—after students have mastered and memorized their math facts.

These significant problems with Oklahoma’s old standards aren’t the only reason that we are dismayed that some lawmakers want to arrest the momentum of *four years* of Common Core implementation. Here are additional concerns with that approach:

1. **It breeds cynicism and distrust among educators and interrupts real progress on the ground**. Our schools are all too familiar with the “flavor-of-the-month” reforms that come and go seemingly on a whim. State leaders promised local school boards, administrators, and teachers that the Common Core standards would be different and that they were here to stay. Educators responded in good faith by investing millions of dollars into professional development and new curricular materials, plus untold man-hours in preparing for these new, more challenging standards. Who wants to tell them that Oklahoma is scrapping all of that because of politics?
2. **It wastes money**. Reports out of Indiana, the one state that has pulled out of the Common Core and adopted its own standards, illustrate that the decision is costly. Some estimates put the price tag of the do-over at over $100 million. And in Indiana, the new standards are quite similar to the Common Core; that would not be the case if Oklahoma returned to its old English and math standards. It would be an even greater disruption.
3. **It locks Oklahoma educators out of a wave of innovation**. As many of us had hoped, the adoption of common standards has led to the development of a variety of great curricular materials and other tools for teachers and students. State governments, nonprofits, and for-profit companies are releasing materials that are dramatically better than the textbooks of old—many of them built for tablets and other new technologies—but that are all aligned with the Common Core. Oklahoma educators will be stuck with a rotary while everyone else speeds ahead with smart phones.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue. Please know that all of us at the Fordham Institute are prepared to help in any way we can to ensure the faithful and effective implementation of the Common Core in Oklahoma.

Cordially,



Michael J. Petrilli

CC: Senate President Brian Bingman  
Speaker T.W. Shannon  
Chairman John Ford  
Chairman Ann Coody  
Senator Gary Stanislawski  
Senator Jim Halligan  
Representative Jason Nelson  
Representative Earl Sears  
Representative Lee Denney  
Superintendent Janet Barresi