

Joint Hearing Select Committees on the Common Core State Standards

October 3, 2013 — Room 417 North, State Capitol, Madison

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Good afternoon. My name is Tony Evers, and I am the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. With me today is Emilie Amundson, director of the Department of Public Instruction's Common Core State Standards Team. I would like to thank the chairs and the committee for the opportunity to speak today on Wisconsin's academic standards.

Just today, I received an email from a teacher in a small Northern Wisconsin school district. She said, "Thank you so much for your strong stand on the Common Core. I see how our math classes have changed for the better — really making students think! Keep up the good work." To me it is really that simple.

Academic standards are a set of expectations for what all students in Wisconsin should know and be able to do in kindergarten through 12th grade. Wisconsin has had academic standards in a variety of subject areas for decades, and we have assessed children in the state on their attainment in reading, math, language arts, science, and social studies since the 1990s.

In the two decades since we have had required standardized testing, the state has set the standards, and students demonstrate their progress toward achieving the state's academic standards through the state's assessments. How schools and districts teach that content — through instruction, curriculum, text book adoption, and more — are all local decisions in our state.

As the independently elected constitutional officer twice entrusted by the people of this state with the authority to supervise public instruction, I adopted the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics as our Wisconsin state standards in June 2010. I did so because the Common Core State Standards are world class standards that will better prepare all of Wisconsin's children to be ready for college and career.

The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics:

- challenge students to learn at higher levels in the critical areas of reading, writing, and mathematics;
- are rigorous, clear, and deeper standards;
- are benchmarked to the highest U.S. state and international standards to ensure students are ready to succeed in college and/or careers; and
- are aligned to the expectations of higher education and employers.

To those who are concerned that the Common Core represents too much "federal intrusion" into our state and local decisions, let me say clearly that I was not coerced by the federal government to adopt the Common Core, and I didn't adopt the Common Core in order to qualify for a Race to the Top grant.

On the contrary, Wisconsin's road to adopting higher and better standards began as early as 2007 — long before President Obama and Race to the Top came on the scene. We knew back then — and were consistently told by business leaders, higher education leaders, educators, and even legislators — that the previous standards were not getting the job done.

Our old ELA and math standards were only set at grades four, eight, and 12, leaving districts to fill in the gaps between grades; often a costly process that took tons of staff time and resources. We heard from businesses that students were not prepared with the knowledge and skills to succeed in the workplace and from higher education leaders who felt students were not as prepared as they needed to be to succeed in college. And, we consistently received low marks from national think tanks, like the Fordham Foundation, that compared the rigor of standards across states.

As a result, years before the state-led common core initiative, DPI began the process of revising our state standards in 2007.

- In 2007, Competitive Wisconsin and DPI held a summit for state business leaders, higher education, educators, and legislators, to determine the kinds of knowledge and skills they felt were most important for growing an educated and prepared Wisconsin workforce. As a result of that work, it was clear that Wisconsin's old standards would need to be replaced.
- DPI then partnered with the American Diploma Project and Partnership for 21st Century Skills to convene a task force focused on examining Wisconsin's 1998 Model Academic Standards to assess their college and career readiness. The task force, comprised of educators, legislators, parents, and business representatives, found the 1998 standards outdated for the demands of today. After the work of the Task Force, individual English Language Arts and Mathematics leadership teams began the process of revising the standards in 2008.
- Midway through Wisconsin's standards revision process, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) began a multi-state discussion about the value of partnering across states to create a common set of college and career ready benchmarks for math and English language arts. The argument was similar to the statewide discussion we were already having — what are the fundamental knowledge and skills that all children should know and be able to do in order to succeed in today's global economy? As NGA and CCSSO began their work with governors and state chiefs around the country, they were able to leverage the work already in progress by states like Wisconsin.

In 2009, Wisconsin joined as a partner in this state-led process to create higher, clearer standards that were internationally benchmarked, specific but not prescriptive, and most importantly, would prepare students for college and careers.

Given that we were already well into our own standards revision process, we were ahead of the curve to be able to analyze the Common Core and how it matched up with Wisconsin values. We had teams of educators and stakeholders already engaged in conversations about what Wisconsin students should know and be able to do in these two core subject areas. We were able to use these same teams to examine multiple draft versions of the Common Core against our own Wisconsin blueprint, which previous critics of Wisconsin's standards called "intellectually demanding" and "well aligned" with college and career expectations.

In March of 2010, the DPI held a summit with representatives from higher education, administration, school boards, teachers, and parents focused on providing feedback on the final draft of the Common Core standards. In addition, public comment periods were held, where any stakeholder, from parents, to educators, to community members, had full access to the entire draft Common Core Standards document, and invitations to provide feedback were sent through many channels. Wisconsinites responded, and comments were largely positive and focused more on specifics, many changes of which were incorporated into the final draft, released in late spring of 2010.

All of this work made my decision around the Common Core State Standards a no brainer. The Common Core State Standards were — and still are — the right move for our children and for our state. To date, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have agreed. In addition to the broad support among K-12 educational organizations, numerous state, national, military, higher education, and parent organizations have offered their support as well, including:

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- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce
 - The Business Roundtable
 - The Partnership for 21st Century Skills
 - The Business-Higher Education Forum
 - The Association of American Colleges and Universities
 - The Military Child Coalition
 - The United States Army and
 - The National PTA, to name just a few.

Since 2010, hundreds of thousands of students and parents have been working to reach this new, tougher bar, and tens of thousands of educators are using the Common Core State Standards in classrooms across the state. Schools and districts have been working with the new standards to plan curriculum and instruction that is both meaningful for the local community, and for the students they serve. They have been publically available for all citizens for over three years.

Also, you, the Legislature, and the governor have supported the implementation of the Common Core in various ways since 2010.

- While I have the constitutional and statutory authority to adopt standards, in 2011 Wisconsin Act 32, the Legislature and governor explicitly required me to adopt the Common Core Standards. The act directed the Department of Public Instruction to replace the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination, which measured the old 1998-era standards, with new pupil assessments that shall “measure mastery of the common core standards.”
- 2013 Wisconsin Act 20, this year’s biennial budget bill, fully funds the Smarter Balanced Assessments aligned to the Common Core. These new assessments are being piloted across the state this spring, and will be fully implemented next year.
- The Governor’s Read to Lead Task Force, which included bipartisan legislative representation, affirmed support for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and considered them to be the underpinning to improving reading outcomes in our state. That report specifically recommended that DPI review and update Wisconsin’s Model Early Learning Standards to align with the Common Core.
- 2011 Wisconsin Act 166 established a new state law on educator effectiveness which requires the use of the new, Common Core-aligned assessments for teacher evaluations, and they are a basis of our work with teacher education programs.
- The new state school accountability system, based on the work of the School and District Accountability Design Team that was quad-chaired by the governor, Legislature’s education chairs, and me, created report cards for school and districts that will have the new assessments as a key component.
- The Common Core State Standards were a point of discussion during the work of the Governor’s Council on College and Workforce Readiness, which included bipartisan legislative representation. The report of the chair of that group, Tim Sullivan, affirmed the importance of the standards, noting their goal of “deeper understanding” of key topics.

The Common Core State Standards are a serious step forward for Wisconsin. They are the foundation of many other transformative efforts to improve student achievement, and our schools. Without strong standards at the foundation,

all of our other efforts — around assessment, accountability, educator effectiveness, early reading — will all fall apart.

Wisconsin's Common Core State Standards are world class, and set a much higher bar for all kids in the state to reach. And we owe it to them to stay the course.

Thank you and I am free to take a few questions.

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Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction. An electronic copy of this testimony can be found online at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/files/eis/pdf/CCSS_common-core-state-standards-testimony.pdf.