



## **Common Core study panel holds its first meeting**

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On Tuesday, December 17th, the NC General Assembly Common Core Study Committee held its first public hearing to address Common Core. I attended, as well as other activists and Tea Party leaders all across the state. Opponents of Common Core who attended were advised to dress in red to make a visual statement to the NC General Assembly of the growing movement against North Carolina's adoption and implementation of the controversial education standards. I proudly wore an oversized red sweater and a sticker that announced my opposition to Common Core - as did so many others. Indeed, the public arena was a sea of red and opposition was palpable.

Those who spoke in favor of Common Core were Dr. June Atkinson, head of the NC Board of Education, and Michael Brickman, the national policy director at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, where he promotes education reform. Prior to his position with the Fordham Institute, Brickman was recruited by Governor Scott Walker to lead his education-reform efforts in Wisconsin.

Brickman has publicly characterized Common Core opponents as a "small but vocal minority of conservatives" coupled with a bit of "the far left." In front of the Study Committee and the audience in red, he stated that opponents are caught up in conspiracy theories and unfounded and baseless talking points. Dr. Atkinson spent a good part of her presentation echoing the same sentiment.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, arguably Common Core's greatest champion, also has accused its opponents of employing conspiracy theories.

Michael Brickman gave a presentation that was essentially broken down in three parts: (i) The poor Report Card that Fordham gave North Carolina for its state Education Standards; (ii) Why Common Core addresses NC's education shortcomings (and poor standards); and (iii) Why opposition to Common Core is based on Myths and not facts.

As most everyone at the meeting was aware, the Common Core was not so much a state-based effort to reform education as it was a well-funded initiative led by certain interest groups to unify the education system from state to state. The Common Core "State" Standards Initiative is an education initiative that details what K-12 students should know in English and math at which grade they should know it. The initiative was sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and according to their websites, "seeks to establish consistent education standards across the states as well as ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to enter two or four year college programs or enter the workforce." It all sounds hunky dory. The Common Core Standards were released for mathematics and English language arts on June 2, 2010, with a majority of states adopting the standards in the subsequent months. Interestingly, the NC Board of Education adopted the standards on the very same day (See the NC Board of Education website -

NCpublicschools.org). The decision was passed into law by the 2011 General Assembly. As the speakers reminded the Committee and the audience, the NC Board of Education has the statutory authority to determine state education standards.

States were given an incentive to adopt the Common Core Standards (that were in the process of being written) through the possibility of competitive federal Race to the Top grants. President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the Race to the Top competitive grants on July 24, 2009, as a motivator for education reform. North Carolina was one of the 16 applicants who were chosen to receive the grants. North Carolina was one of only 11 states, and DC, to apply for the grant money. (55 school districts among those 11 states applied). To be eligible, states had to adopt "internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the work place." North Carolina received a grant amount of

\$399,465,769. As per the grant stipulations, half of the award must go towards state efforts to meet "Race to the Top" goals (that is, to support locally-developed plans to personalize and deepen student learning, to directly improve student achievement and educator effectiveness, to close achievement gaps, and to prepare every student to succeed in college and their careers) and the other half can be spent otherwise.

Three DC-based organizations provided support for the development of the Common Core Standards - The National Governors Association (NGA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (NCCSSO), and Achieve, Inc. The Seattle, WA-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded a significant portion of the funding for the project. The chief architects of the Common Core Standards themselves were three individuals - David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba, who have ties to one or more of the groups listed above. Coleman, Pimentel, and Zimba were assisted by committees of college professors, public school teachers, state education officials, consultants, and representatives from advocacy groups. According to two curriculum experts, "changes to standards and curricula are being dictated by a very select group that occupies the top of the educational food chain.... the folks making the changes - or at least writing and assessing the educational mandates - are far away from the majority of folks who need to implement the changes."

David Coleman has since been hired to modify the SAT and ACT college-admission tests to align them with the Common Core Standards.

Though standards have not yet been developed for science or social studies, the Next Generation Science Standards are in the process of being developed. They are not directly related to the Common Core, but their content can be cross-connected to the mathematical and English Language Arts standards within the Common Core.

Michael Brickman told the Study Committee that the Thomas B. Fordham Institute group reviewed North Carolina's old education standards (prior to the adoption of Common Core) and concluded that they were written very poorly. In fact, the Institute gave NC's English standards a "D" and gave its math standards an "F." Brickman explained that North Carolina was badly in need of better standards – ones that were written better and were better aligned with the grades they should be achieved in. And consequently, it wasn't hard to understand why NC readily adopted the Common Core Standards. [Incidentally, the Fordham Institute gave the Common Cores Standards a much higher rating].

Once he concluded his presentation, members of the Committee asked several questions. One question

to Brickman was "Who exactly determined what constitutes 'good education standards' are?" An answer was not provided, but Brickman promised to send the Committee an email with some links. Senator Jerry Tillman, who represents Moore and Randolph counties, asked the Fordham Institute policy director if he was familiar with "The Nation's Report Card?" ["The Nation's Report Card" rates the individual states in various areas of education, as well as rating the US in general as against other industrialized nations of the world. It informs the public about the academic achievement of elementary and secondary students in school systems across the United States. Report cards communicate the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which conducts a continuing and national measure of achievement in various subjects over time. Since 1969, NAEP assessments have been conducted periodically in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and other subjects. NAEP collects and reports information on student performance at the national, state, and local levels, making the assessment an integral part of our nation's evaluation of the condition and progress of education]. Tillman emphasized that North Carolina has scored above average in the NAEP evaluation!! His point was that the Fordham Institute's assessment of NC's education standards doesn't appear to be supported by the performance of the state.

Another question addressed the ability of the state to modify the Common Core Standards. Brickman explained that the standards are copyrighted by NGA Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the CCSSO. The states are granted a public license which waives the copyright notice for State Departments of Education to use the standards; however, two conditions apply. First, the use of the standards must be "in support" of the standards and the waiver only applies if the state has adopted the standards "in whole." According to Brickman, states are able to modify the Standards up to 15%. To be more specific, states can add to the Standards but can NOT delete anything. According to the NCA Center and CCSSO, the copyright is supposed to "ensure that the standards will be the same throughout the nation." Brickman, on the other hand, explained the copyright in a different way. He said that the reason the standards are copyrighted is that the writers of the standards want to ensure that if the states modify their standards in any way, they can never "take credit" for what the NGA Center and CCSSO have written. In other words, the goal of these groups isn't to help reform education at the state level, but rather the goal is to control and synchronize it at a national level.

Next to speak was Dr. June Atkinson. Her presentation was essentially broken down into two parts: (i) an overview of the history of education standards and the adoption of Common Core in NC; and (ii) the "myths" surrounding Common Core. She began by giving a historical perspective as to how North Carolina came to adopt the Common Core Standards:

(a) In 1996-97, the NC General Assembly passed the "ABC's Accountability Model" to assess the performance of all schools in the state. This introduced a testing scheme to NC public schools to assess performance.

(b) In 2006, the State Board of Education adopted new education goals – "Education Goals - Future-Ready Students for the 21st Century"

(c) In 2008, the State Board of Education formed a Study Committee to study NC education standards and testing and to make recommendations. The Committee recommended that the Board revise ALL the standards for grades K through 12. The Board then began to revise the state standards.

(d) In 2009, NC applied for "Race to the Top" funding, and was awarded a grant of \$399,465,769 (over a 4-year period).

(e) On June 2, 2010, the Common Core standards were released, and the NC Board of Education readily adopted them as the Standard Course of Study for NC schools.

Why did North Carolina adopt the Common Core Standards? The NC State Board of Education offered six reasons why it was advantageous for the state to adopt common standards and tests. The reasons included the following: 1) equity; 2) college and career readiness; 3) state-to-state comparability of test results; 4) sharing of resources; 5) economies of scale; and 6) student mobility. While these are laudable, many argue that North Carolina could easily realize all six goals using means other than Common Core.

When Dr. Atkinson finished, the Study Committee members asked her a few questions. First was Senator Tillman who asked two questions: (i) Will Common Core add more testing to an education curriculum that is already burdened with too much testing?; (ii) Why can't North Carolina come up with its own Standard Course of Study and bow out of Common Core in order to serve state education concerns more directly? He emphasized that he is in support of education standards.

As to the first question, Dr. Atkinson couldn't give a direct answer. She guessed that the amount of testing would likely remain the same. As to the second question, he specifically wanted to get Dr. Atkinson's opinion of an idea to review the Common Core Standards, to keep the good but take out the bad and replace it with standards are more favorable to state educators. He said "then we can call it the 'NC Standard Course of Study!' I'm all about branding North Carolina!!" Dr. Atkinson admitted that she was not in support of his suggestion. She asked: "And where will the funding come from?" She said that a lot of the Race to the Top funds have already been spent to "train and update" teachers in the state and to apply to "a few special needs students."

Where exactly is the concern of our State Board of Education directed?? Is it in meaningful reform that addresses the concerns of the citizens in the state and serves our children best, or is it all about the money? A resourceful and determined state legislature can always figure out ways to obtain the money for state education.

The clear, take-home message from the public hearing in front of the NCGA Common Core Study Group can be summarized as follows:

(1) There is no dispute that standards are a good thing to guide an education curriculum and standards should be rigorous.

(2) North Carolina itself recognized that some reform of its standards was necessary and had taken positive steps towards that goal. In fact, it had written standards (state-generated standards) that were on the same track as Common Core. That is, the standards were written more clearly and better aligned to grade level.

(3) If North Carolina already recognized the need for better standards and was at the point of almost producing state-derived and robust education standards, why was there the need to adopt the Common Core Standards?

(4) It appears that the NC Board of Education only adopted the Standards in order to receive federal funding through the "Race to the Top" grant contest. (Although this was not addressed)

(5) Not one of the presenters, including the very articulate and likeable Dr. June Atkinson, was able to explain why exactly North Carolina needed to adopt Common Core.

(6) North Carolina legislators are getting a clear message from their constituent districts and that message – from both parents and educators – is that they are NOT happy with Common Core !

(7) North Carolina legislators appear not to be convinced that Common Core is the solution to the state's education problems. They appear to be adopting the mindset that the NC Board of Education can realize their education goals using means other than Common Core.

(8) North Carolina legislators appear to be fairly hostile to the notion that the state needs to adopt a top-down, one-size-fits-all education initiative endorsed and pushed by the federal government when it has the resources and the sovereign obligation to address the education of its citizens.

The truth is that Common Core is opposed by scholars at several leading think tanks on both the right and left, including the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, the Brookings Institution and my own Cato Institute. Objective research conducted by many noteworthy organizations, including those above, and concerned parents and educators, has shown there is essentially no meaningful evidence that national standards lead to superior educational outcomes. Hoover Institution senior fellow Eric Hanushek, a well-known education economist and supporter of standards-based reform, has reached a similar conclusion about likely Common Core impotence. He wrote: "We currently have very different standards across states, and experience from the states provides little support for the argument that simply declaring more clearly what we want children to learn will have much impact."

Tom Loveless, a scholar at the center-left Brookings Institution, reached a similar conclusion. In 2012, Loveless demonstrated that moving to national standards would have little, if any, positive effect because the performance of states has had very little connection to the rigor or quality of their standards. There is also much greater achievement variation within states than among them. Loveless argues that Common Core is not a cure for America's education woes. He wrote: "Don't let the ferocity of the oncoming debate fool you. The empirical evidence suggests that the Common Core will have little effect on American students' achievement. The nation will have to look elsewhere for ways to improve its schools."

Opposition is not limited to those on the right or center-right. On the far left, education historian and expert Diane Ravitch has been a vocal opponent from the start. She strongly emphasizes that Common Core is untested, was assembled behind closed doors, and was essentially foisted on schools by tying it to the federal 'Race to the Top' funding contest.'

The hope is that the next three public meetings will address the criticisms and possible alternative solutions to the perceived problems with the education system in North Carolina. I use the term "perceived problems with our education system" because not once has any legislator or education expert addressed the heart of the problem. Forbes Magazine may have summed it up best: "A lot of venture capital is being poured into 'reforming' American education. However, the variable invariably overlooked by the imaginative and passionate ed-tech crowd is human nature itself. Until there is a sea change in the self and institutional preservationist mindset undergirding our educational system, no amount of investment will significantly improve the college or career readiness of America's youth."