



New Pioneer Report Right on Common Core Damage, But Massachusetts Still Needs Standards-Based Reforms in Education

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Pioneer Institute in Boston recently issued [an informative report](#) criticizing Common Core's standards for the damage they have done to student achievement in this country and to the school choice movement.

The authors of this report — Ted Rebarber of Accountability Works and Neil McCluskey at the CATO Institute — urge a return not to the state's pre-Common Core standards but to the conditions that led to standards-based reforms — in the 1970s and 1980s. Rebarber and McCluskey don't quite say that, of course. They say: "We must shift standards-based reforms away from government central planners in order to disrupt the status quo and leverage innovative, ambitious curricula."

Unfortunately, they have no concrete suggestions of "innovative, ambitious curricula" to offer their readers, especially in reading or English language arts, the two fundamental subjects in the K-12 curriculum. That is probably because neither of the authors has roots in K-12 education, or in standards or curriculum development at any educational level. Indeed, while highly critical of Common Core's effects on the mathematics curriculum, they do not point to the research on American students' current reading levels as [reported in the *Huffington Post* in 2012](#).

Nor do Rebarber and McCluskey report the only baseline research on how the English and reading curriculum in our high schools has changed because of Common Core's English language arts and reading standards. See, for example, what English teachers in Arkansas assigned in Grades 9, 10, and 11 in a [study](#) by Sandra Stotsky, Christian Goering, and David Jolliffe, released in 2009 or what is in [a similarly designed study](#) by Sandra Stotsky, Joan Traffas, and James Woodworth on what English teachers in a national sample assigned in grades 9, 10, and 11, also released in 2009.

Should this country return to the conditions that led to standards-based reforms or do schools need some guidance on how to recover lost ground in reading and the English language arts? They could begin by noting what is missing in Common Core's English language arts standards and what needs to be in a high school English curriculum, as spelled out in [the Pioneer Institute's own 2012 study](#) by Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky, ("How Common Core's ELA Standards

Place College Readiness at Risk”), one of the very few studies on Common Core’s English language arts standards by an English professor.

Or administrators and English teachers at our high schools could look at what is available free of charge in English language arts and reading standards based on the pre-Common Core standards in Massachusetts that helped to vault Bay State students to the top in national and international tests, improving the scores of all groups of low-income students at the same time.

The 2001 standards helped the state to achieve the highest average scores in grades 4 and 8 in both mathematics and reading on the 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013 tests given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The scores of the state’s low-income students, compared with those in other states on the National Association of Educational Progress’s 2007 tests (the only year for which there is a demographic breakdown across states), were tied for first place in grades 4 and 8 mathematics and in grade 4 reading. In grade 8 reading, they were tied for second place. For results on international tests in mathematics and science (TIMSS) given in 2007 and 2013, Massachusetts fourth-graders ranked second worldwide in science achievement and tied for third in mathematics; the state’s eighth-graders tied for first in science and ranked sixth in mathematics. The Bay State percentage of public high school students passing Advanced Placement courses with a 3 or more on the AP test is a larger percentage than in most other states in the nation and well above the national average of 15.2 percent.

Here is a summary of the evaluative comments by the reviewers of the state’s 2001 and 2004 standards for English language arts (Sheila Byrd Carmichael, Kathleen Porter-Magee and others) comparing them with Common Core’s English language arts standards, in the *State of State Standards — and the Common Core — in 2010*, released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute on July 21, 2010:

Massachusetts’s existing standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards. Essential content is grouped more logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands. In addition, Massachusetts frequently uses standard-specific examples to clarify expectations. Unlike the Common Core, Massachusetts’s standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail throughout the document, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. While both sets of standards address American literature and append lists of exemplar texts, Massachusetts’s reading list is far more comprehensive. Standards addressing vocabulary development and grammar are also more detailed and rigorous in the Massachusetts document.

Massachusetts Governor Charile Baker and state Secretary of Education James Peyser, both of whom approved the 2001 standards when they came out, could oversee their re-adoption. What’s to lose?