



**Testimony of Michael Cohen  
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Michigan House of Representatives  
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**Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to speak with you this morning about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). You have an important responsibility to advise this chamber and the entire legislature with respect to whether to proceed with the implementation of the Common Core.

As you consider how to move forward, it is important to understand how we got here -- how Michigan and 44 other states, plus the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity came to adopt common grade by grade standards that define the knowledge and skills all students need in mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy. This improbable development occurred neither by command nor by conspiracy, but by the choices duly elected and appointed state leaders made based on 20 years of state leadership and experimentation in standards based education reform. It is a prime example of what can happen in our federal system in which states are the “laboratories of American democracy.”

My task this morning is to tell you about this history. Before doing so, however, I want to tell you a little bit about Achieve, as it is part of that history. Achieve is an independent, bipartisan nonprofit education reform organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability in order to prepare all young people for college, career and citizenship. We were founded at the 1996 National Education Summit; a unique gathering of governors, business leaders and educators who met to consider ways to strengthen and continuously improve state standards based reforms. Achieve was formed to serve that purpose. Our Board of Directors is comprised of

governors and business leaders. Governor John Engler was one of the founding directors of the Achieve Board.

Since its inception Achieve has helped more than 40 states strengthen the rigor, clarity, focus and coherence of state standards, thereby helping make them more manageable in the classroom. Our signature program has been the American Diploma Project, a research and development project that worked with postsecondary faculty and employers in five states to identify the math and literacy skills essential for success in postsecondary education and training programs. The American Diploma Project Network now includes 35 states that educate nearly 90% of the public school students in the U.S.; each of these states is committed to aligning high school standards, assessments and requirements for high school graduation with the skill demands of college and careers.

This work is guided by the recognition that nearly two-thirds of jobs will require some postsecondary training or education beyond high school, in career training programs that lead to industry-recognized credential, or two- or four-year colleges and graduate programs. It is guided by the principle that all young people need to become “career ready” -- including but not only those who enroll in 4-year colleges -- and that their K-12 education should equip them with a core set of skills that will enable them to pursue the career of their choice, and the education and training pathways needed to reach their career goals. It is anchored in research which indicates that there is a core set of literacy and mathematics skills that high school graduates must develop in order to succeed in any postsecondary education or training program.

More recently, Achieve worked closely with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to support the development of the Common Core State Standards, and was selected by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment

consortium of states to be its project management partner. More recently, Achieve has helped a network of 26 states develop Next Generation Science Standards.

**State standards have been part of the education policy landscape for more than 20 years.**

State academic standards define the desired outcomes of instruction – what students should know and be able to do and the level of performance that students are expected to attain. They are not a curriculum and do not dictate the instructional strategies, materials or curriculum districts and teachers should use to help students acquire the knowledge and develop the skills in the standards. In addition to defining essential knowledge and skills, state standards serve two related purposes. One is to raise expectations for student performance, to better prepare students to compete in a global economy. The second is to serve as the foundation for systemic education reforms. State standards should be the catalyst for local -and state-level initiatives to align curriculum, assessments, instructional strategies and materials, and professional development into coherent and sustained instructional improvement efforts.

The impetus for the development of state standards dates back to the Reagan Administration’s A Nation At Risk report, which identified low expectations as one of the primary causes of the mediocre performance of U.S. students compared with students in other industrialized countries. That report was quickly followed by a number of other reports and major events that in combination fueled state-led education reforms. In 1986 the National Governors Association, under the leadership of Lamar Alexander, released Time for Results, in which governors committed to hold schools accountable for results and give educators greater flexibility in how to achieve them. This was soon followed by the 1989 National Education Summit between President George H.W. Bush and 49 of the Nation’s governors. Together they established national education goals and called on

states to set academic standards in the core academic subjects as a first step in restructuring their K-12 education systems for high performance. Coherently aligned state standards, assessments and accountability systems are key components of every state's education reform strategy and the foundation for local curriculum, and remain so to this date.

Though state leaders, governors in particular, provided the leadership for the development of state academic standards and aligned assessments, the federal government provided the funds. In 1990 Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander provided more than \$40 million in grants to nearly every state to underwrite the development of state standards. The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act included a requirement that states develop and implement academic statewide, for all students, as a condition for receiving Title I funds. States also had to develop and implement assessments aligned to those standards and use them to measure the progress of students in every school toward meeting the standards. These tests provided the measures to be incorporated into state and federal school accountability systems. In addition to requiring the development of state standards and assessments, Congress provided states with funds to help pay for their development and implementation. It is important to note that while the federal government required states to have academic standards, it also prohibited the Secretary of Education to exercise any direction or control over those standards. In compliance with these two obligations, the U.S. Department of Education required evidence from each state that it had in fact adopted reading and math standards (evidence which could be found on the web with relative ease), but it did not review or approve the content of the standards.

The National Education Goals also spawned several efforts to create national standards and assessments. In its America 2000 program unveiled in 1990, Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander proposed to create 15 American Achievement exams, voluntary national tests in core academic subjects, though

the Congress refused to authorize or fund them. The Bush Administration also funded various national organizations to develop model national standards in core subjects such as English Language Arts, science, civics, geography and history. These were intended to be used as resources to help states develop their own standards. Some of these turned out to be useful, but a number were quite controversial. In its Goals 2000 program the Clinton Administration proposed creating a body to review national standards. This too proved to be quite controversial, creating for some the specter of a federally established National School Board with authority over local curriculum. That misconception was sufficient to lead to the repeal of the statutory provisions before the body could be appointed. Clinton subsequently proposed Voluntary National Tests in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, based on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments in those grades and subjects. Though test development was underway and seven states (including Michigan) and fifteen urban school districts committed to administer the assessments, Congress did not continue to provide the funds to support the development and implementation of the assessments.

In short, none of these efforts to create national standards and/or national tests succeeded. In fact, they were each quite controversial, generated endless debates about what level of government should be in control of education, and produced considerably more political heat than education light. These battles diverted attention away from important work that could have led to greater progress.

By the mid 1990's, fewer than a dozen states had developed standards. In less than a decade, every state had standards in core subject areas, and a many had already revised their standards once. These revisions helped improve the quality of state standards, typically increasing their clarity, specificity and rigor.

*Yet despite these modest improvements, standards in many states suffered from significant and common weaknesses:*

***Virtually none were intentionally aligned with the skills needed for postsecondary success.*** State standards represented an agreement among content experts regarding what is desirable for students to learn, but they were not developed based on a careful analysis of evidence regarding the skills students must have by the time they complete high school in order to enter and succeed in two and 4 year colleges, career training programs and the workplace. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, nearly two thirds of jobs will require some postsecondary education, in either two or four-year programs.

Failing to align K-12 standards with the skills demanded for college and careers leaves many students woefully unprepared when they graduate from high school.

- Nationally, some 30% of first year students in postsecondary education are required to take remedial courses.
- 40% - 45% of recent high school graduates report significant gaps in their skills, both in college and the workplace.
- Faculty estimate 42% of first year students in credit-bearing courses are academically unprepared
- Employers estimate 45% of recent high school graduates lack skills to advance
- ACT estimates only half of college-bound students are ready for college-level reading

***State standards were literally all over the map.*** There was little consistency across states in the content, clarity or rigor of expectations from grade to grade in core reading and mathematics standards. One study found as little as 20% of grade level math standards were common across states. Further, compared to

high performing countries, math standards in U.S. states were “a mile wide and an inch deep” according to Professor Bill Schmidt at MSU. Teachers had to cover as many as 40 topics in a year, touching the surface of most, but not providing students the time to really understand or apply the mathematics. Students might remember the formulas and algorithms they were taught, but few also understood the mathematics behind them or knew when and why to apply them. And a significant amount of time in each grade had to be spent reviewing the material students supposedly learned the previous year. In contrast, the mathematics curriculum in high performing countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Finland are much more highly focused. They focus on many fewer topics at each grade level, giving teachers and students the time necessary to understand the mathematics as well as learn the formulas. They provide a clear logical progression of topics from grade to grade, so that instruction in each grade provides a solid foundation for learning material in the next grade.

State reading standards also had characteristic weaknesses. For example, standards for reading comprehension typically showed little or no progression from grade to grade. As a result, the expectations for students sometimes stagnated, which contributes to low levels of rigor. Consider the following reading comprehension standards from a state whose standards Achieve reviewed in 1999:

*Grade 7: Compare different texts that have similar themes. Recognize how writers discuss multiple causes and effects and create mood. Make and revise predictions. Compare story events and characters. Challenge opinions and generalizations. Make inferences and draw conclusions. Interpret figurative language.*

*Grade 8: Compare the themes in different books. Recognize how an author uses action. Examine causes and effects. Make predictions and inferences, and draw conclusions. Challenge opinions. Understand*

*figurative language.*

*Grade 9: Compare how two authors treat the same topic. Recognize how an author creates suspense. Examine causes and effects. Make inferences and draw conclusions. Make, confirm and adjust predictions. Challenge opinions. Understand figurative language.*

These standards overlap; students in all three grades must make inferences and predictions, draw conclusions, challenge opinions, and work with cause and effect and figurative language. While these may, in fact, be appropriate topics to cover each year, the lack of additional clarity, or guidance with respect to the complexity of the texts students should read, makes it hard to delineate how coverage at one grade level differs from the next. Thus, there is no indication of increasing depth or rigor. Note also that a relatively rigorous expectation precedes a less demanding one, as students must *interpret* figurative language in grade 7 before being asked to *understand* it in grade 8.

***State tests and proficiency standards are also all over the map.*** Just as state content standards are all over the map, so are state tests and proficiency standards. Each state had developed its own accountability tests, aligned to its own standards, and has determined the cut scores students need to reach in order to be considered “proficient”. The result is that the same level of student performance is defined in very different ways, depending on the state. We can tell this because each state participates in the state NAEP assessments in reading and math. We know from those data that in 2009, in 35 states, including Michigan, the scores that earn a student a “proficient” determination on the state 4th grade reading test correspond to the “below basic” level on NAEP. In Massachusetts, the highest performing state, 54% of 4th graders scored proficient on the state reading test, while 47% scored proficient on NAEP. There is not a big difference between these two percentages. In contrast, in Michigan, 77% of the 4th graders scored proficient on the state reading test, while only 30% scored proficient on NAEP. Clearly, proficient does not mean the same thing in



Michigan and Massachusetts. These kinds of differences between states also show up on 8th grade reading and 4th and 8th grade math tests.

State high school tests are often not as rigorous as one would assume. In 2004 Achieve did a study of high school exit exams in 5 states – Texas, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Ohio. These are the tests that students in half the states must pass in order to earn a high school diploma. They are typically taken in 10th grade. Achieve’s research found that in order to pass the math test, students needed to only demonstrate knowledge and skills that students in high performing countries typically study in 8th grade. No wonder that students who pass these tests and earn a high school diploma often must take remedial math courses when they enroll in community colleges or four-year institutions. Clearly, states often tell students they are proficient even though they are not prepared.

State tests are the primary means for holding schools accountable for results, and for telling policymakers such as yourselves whether your investments in education are paying off. The differences in what state tests measure and how proficiency is defined means that parents, the public and policymakers have a very difficult time evaluating the quality of the state’s schools. You don’t know if schools in Michigan are improving faster or slower than schools in Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana or those in other states or countries with whom our students and employers will compete for jobs and skilled labor. And while educators can learn about best practices elsewhere in Michigan, they have a much more difficult time doing that from classrooms or schools in other states.

**State leaders chose to address these weakness collaboratively rather than 50 different times through the development of Common Core State Standards**

Over the past decade these weaknesses became increasingly evident to state education policy makers, educators and the public. They saw mounting evidence

that many states were simply setting expectations that are too low. In many states, undemanding standards and tests have been contributed to poor preparation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, and resulted in limited options for many high school graduates, high remediation rates and declining education performance compared with other countries with whom we compete. Addressing these weaknesses one state at a time would be costly, inefficient and unnecessary, particularly when the expectations of the knowledge based economy and a diverse and mobile population affect all states.

In 2008 an advisory group comprised of educators, governors and business leaders convened by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers and Achieve recommended that states work together to benchmark their academic standards to those of high performing countries, and use the results to inform the development of common state standards. That same year, Achieve released a study of 16 states in the American Diploma Project Network that had revised their state high school math and literacy standards to be aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and career training programs. The study found that, in contrast to the wide differences in state standards reported previously, there was a common core of math and literacy standards across these states. Disciplining the development of standards by focusing on the evidence about the knowledge and skills student must have to succeed in the real world lead to quite similar standards across the states, because the real world demands do not vary significantly from state to state. The ability to read complex texts, make coherent and logical arguments based on evidence, solve novel problems, have a strong grasp of basic mathematical skills and quantitative reasoning skills are universally required. Further, states had demonstrated the feasibility of a collaborative and state-led approach to developing common standards, without any federal involvement.

***The Common Core State Standards Initiative.*** The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers developed plans for developing Common Core State Standards during 2008, and launched the

project with the participation of 48 states in the Spring of 2009. The states agreed to participate in a process that would produce standards that:

- Incorporated the knowledge and skills necessary for students to enter and succeed in credit-bearing courses in postsecondary technical -and career-training programs, and 2- and 4-year colleges;
- Are clear, focused and manageable in the classroom;
- Built on the best of existing state standards and are as least as rigorous as the most demanding state standards;
- Are internationally benchmarked, drawing on the lessons about standards from high performing countries; and
- Are evidence and research based.

The governors and chief state school officers that committed to participate in this project did not commit in advance to adopt the resulting standards. Rather they reserved the decision as to whether or not to adopt the standards to the duly constituted governing authority in the state, once the standards were finalized. They were also clear that there would be no federal participation in the process at all – no federal funding, no federal review or involvement. **In fact, the Common Core State Standards may well be the only state standards created in the last two decades that have not been developed with federal funds.**

The process was participatory. It started with research provided by ACT, the College Board and Achieve on the knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and career training programs, drawing on surveys of faculty and employers, examination of the work students do in first year courses, and of the relationship between the performance on test such as the ACT or SAT and student performance in postsecondary courses. Content experts from each state participated in the development process, serving as an integral part of the writing team, contributing and/or reviewing material on an ongoing basis. Content experts in every state, and the advisors they relied on, reviewed multiple

drafts of the standards between the summer of 2009 and Spring of 2010 when the standards were finalized. Three drafts of the standards were shared for public review, generating thousands of comments along the way. In addition, educators from a variety of national organizations and local school districts were consulted directly and frequently for advice. Academic experts were also deeply involved in the standards development process. Achieve played a role in this process by sharing our expertise on state standards and by facilitating the engagement of states and content experts in the development process.

### **Key Advances in the Common Core State Standards**

The CCSS have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, as well as by the Department of Defense Education Activity whose schools serve the children of military families stationed on bases here in the U.S. and around the world. They are rigorous and aligned with the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary success, in careers and in postsecondary education.

In addition, there are several key advances compared to existing state standards, which make the standards more manageable in the classroom, and help students develop the problem solving and reasoning skills necessary for careers and postsecondary education and training.

In English Language Arts/Literacy, these include:

- A balance between literature and ***nonfiction and informational texts***, supported by ***literacy*** standards for science, history, and technical subjects to enable students to read and write in a wider range of contexts.
- An emphasis on explanatory writing, including writing and speaking using ***evidence drawn from texts*** to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information.
- Regular practice with increasingly ***complex text*** and its academic language, or words that may appear in a variety of contexts.

In Mathematics, these include:

- A sharper **focus** on fewer key topics in each grade to allow educators and students to go deeper into the content so students can better understand concepts.
- A **coherent** progression of learning across grades and across concepts, with each progression resulting in students' fluency in a given concept. Each standard is not a new event, but an extension of previous learning.
- **Rigor** through mathematical practices that foster reasoning, **flexible and real-world application** and deeper **conceptual understanding** across the discipline.

## **Conclusion**

These advances will make significant differences to teachers and their students. They free teachers from the need to race through the curriculum, and instead take the time to go into the depth that the content, and their students, deserve. They can allow students to read, and reread if necessary, classical literature with challenging vocabulary, complex rather than straightforward structure, and rich ambiguity, helping students to develop the necessary reading skills rather than give them watered down texts. Elementary school teachers in grades 3-5 can focus on multiplication and division of whole numbers and fractions, helping students develop procedural fluency, conceptual understanding and the ability to apply these foundational skills. There is enough time to help struggling students so they too have the solid foundation necessary to take on algebra by 8th grade.

As these standards are being implemented and new aligned assessments come on line, parents will come to understand whether their students are on track to developing the skills needed for the postsecondary opportunities of their choice. Local educators can already begin to choose among a wide range of curriculum and instructional materials aligned to the Common Core being developed by commercial publishers, nonprofit organizations and other states. And

policymakers and taxpayers will be able to judge the progress and performance of public education in their states as compared with those of other states, and draw on the most effective policies and practices anywhere.

These benefits are already being realized in 44 states around the country. Your work on this Committee will go a long way in determining whether parents, students, educators and taxpayers in Michigan will as well.