

## **Why SHEEO supports the Common Core State Standards, and what we intend to do about them**

Paul E. Lingenfelter

President, State Higher Education Executive Officers

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- 1) Thanks to Muriel and her colleagues for the invitation to be on this panel today. SHEEO has had no better partner than AASCU in our efforts to promote good public policy for higher education, and I'm honored to be at your annual meeting.
- 2) Let me begin by saying that I believe the development of Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts in elementary and secondary education is a very important event in the history of education in the United States.
- 3) I'm getting to the age when I think of every educational policy initiative in terms of my own life experience. To be clear about my age, I cannot remember the GI Bill or the Truman Commission!
- 4) But I do remember Sputnik, which was launched on October 4, 1957. I was in seventh grade. By the time I was in eighth grade we had an advanced math curriculum in Elyria, Ohio public schools and the National Defense Education Act had been passed. By the time I was a freshman in high school, Russian language was offered in my working class community. And in the next dozen years postsecondary enrollments and public investment in higher education more than doubled, and the baby-boom generation achieved an unprecedented level of educational attainment.
- 5) The Sputnik story reminds me that the American people can accomplish a lot very quickly when we agree that something needs to be done.
- 6) A sense of national purpose emerging from the post-Sputnik consensus carried us a long way during the 1960s. Then after what might be viewed as a decade of gradually growing complacency, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell issued the report, *A Nation At Risk* in 1983. This report helped launch a quarter century of educational "reform" that is still with us. I know educational reform is a very complex topic, but frankly, "educational reform" in my recent experience feels less like a common national purpose and more like an exercise in placing or deflecting blame.
- 7) I've thought it would be good to have another galvanizing event like Sputnik, but I don't see one on the horizon. But I believe we are no less "at risk" than we were in 1957 and 1983. So absent such a galvanizing event, I think educators should take surprising and dramatic action to create a national sense of common purpose. We should stun the nation with unprecedented unanimity and cooperation in using common standards for math and English to improve student learning.
- 8) The Common Core State Standards is a good example of sensible collaboration among the states as well as a terrific opportunity to demonstrate educational leadership and commitment across K-12

and higher education. Let me say what SHEEO has done and plans to do in support of them.

- 9) In July of 2009 when the Common Core State Standards were in the very early states of development, SHEEO was approached by NGA and CCSSO and asked to endorse the effort. Our executive committee discussed the proposition, and approved a letter making the following points:
- a) We endorse the concept.
  - b) Assessments for the standards are indispensable
  - c) Math and English standards are vital, but no substitute for a full college preparatory curriculum
  - d) Wide and deep postsecondary involvement in design and implementation is essential

This endorsement, which at the time some may have perceived to be a bit lukewarm, was admittedly cautious. It was too early to know much about the substance of the standards, and CCSSO and NGA were hedging their bets on how long it might take to develop assessments.

- 10) In the past 16 months SHEEO's endorsement has become enthusiastic. We and our colleagues have had opportunities to read the standards and assess the quality of the teams who developed them. As standards go, this is a superior product.

With the assistance of the Department of Education, two multi-state consortia are hard at work to develop sophisticated assessments of K-12 student learning along each step of the way toward college and career readiness.

We have no illusions that fewer, clearer, and higher standards for mathematics and English language arts will improve student learning automatically. It will also take substantial student effort, curricular focus, and skillful, creative teaching to increase student attainment. But better standards and assessments can help inspire and guide those other essential elements.

- 11) We are now working to promote and facilitate postsecondary support for the Common Core Standards, postsecondary engagement in the development of assessments of career and college readiness, and postsecondary utilization of these assessments for placement in entry level college courses in mathematics and English language arts.

- 12) What will implementation of the standards mean in concrete terms for colleges and universities?
- a) High school graduates who meet the standards will be able to enroll in entry-level college courses in math and English without any need for remediation or further demonstration of capacity. Ideally, assessments of attainment of the common standards will replace current placement tests.
  - b) High school graduates meeting the standards will be eligible for admission to moderately selective colleges and universities. (It is clear we now admit many students who do not meet these standards.) Higher levels of attainment on the standards and specific high school course requirements may be required for admission to more selective institutions or programs.

- c) Colleges and universities will need to provide in-service education for current teachers to assure they themselves have achieved these standards and are able to help students attain them. And teacher education programs must focus on developing the capacity of new teachers to enable student to achieve these standards.

Let me close by listing and responding to some of the criticisms I've heard of the CCSS initiative:

**13) The Common Core State Standards are a top-down national (Trojan horse federal) strategy – diversity among the states is a better approach.** This comment came from Charles Miller in Texas, former Chair of the Spellings Commission. Texas is one of two states that have avoided any form of endorsement of this effort. While I agree with Mr. Miller on some things, in this case I respectfully disagree:

- a) Confusing, multiple standards keep students guessing (often wrongly) about their preparation for college and work. States have wasted valuable resources by continually re-invent the wheel independently with no material differences in substance, but too-wide variability in the level of expectation. Confusing, multiple standards have been an obstacle to educational progress in the U.S.
- b) A national consensus on Math and English language skills is both possible and highly desirable. In fact, we have always had an implicit consensus in these fields; it is irresponsible not to articulate it clearly.
- c) The Common Core State Standards are a superior product – worthy of support. They may benefit from fine-tuning over time, but we should not waste time and effort on tiny refinements.
- d) Finally, I find it ironic that Texas leaders, where they prescribe acceptable textbooks, are arguing for diversity in expectations in math and English.

**14) Math and English language skills are not enough. We need standards for science, civics, etc.** This criticism comes from people who, like me, believe strongly in a broad, liberal education. In response I suggest:

- a) Math and English language arts are fundamental to everything else in education, without these skills students cannot acquire the knowledge in all the fields they need in order to be ready for college, careers, and responsible citizenship.
- b) The need for the traditional “college prep” curriculum is not diminished by math and English standards. I believe a broad and well-balanced high school curriculum should be required both for diplomas and college admission. While I'm open to considering other views, I'm not convinced we need national standards for everything in high school. It might be far more difficult and less productive to attempt national standards for science and social studies, for example.

**15) Standards are not sufficient – the curriculum and teacher capacity are the keys to learning.**

- a) Curriculum and teacher capacity are critical, perhaps even *more* critical than learning goals. But in math and English, we really *have* standards, and we owe it to teachers, students, and curriculum designers to make the learning goals explicit so they have a clear target and ways of meaningfully assessing achievement.
- b) Postsecondary leaders need to become engaged in assuring that teacher capacity, assessments, and curriculum expectations are up to the task.

**16) Standards don't really matter, except negatively; standardization is a danger. Teaching to tests is counterproductive in education.**

- a) Freedom of thought and debate is critical; I agree that standardization, except for core skills, is a danger. But calculation and communication *depend* on standardization of fundamentals.
- b) It is difficult to assess critical thinking, problem solving abilities, and creativity, and it is a bad idea to focus teaching on narrow assessments. But these are the reasons we need sophisticated, multifaceted assessments, not valid arguments against standards and assessments of any kind.
- c) Of course everything important cannot be measured well, and some important things may not be measurable at all. But some important things can be measured, and the ability to compute, comprehend, and communicate are among them.