

**Testimony of  
Joan Benso, President and CEO  
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children**

**Senate Education Committee  
May 15, 2013**

Good afternoon, my name is Joan Benso and I am the president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), a statewide, independent, non-partisan child advocacy organization committed to improving the education, health and well-being of children in the commonwealth. Our goal at PPC is straightforward: to make Pennsylvania one of the top 10 states to be a child and to raise a child. We currently rank 14<sup>th</sup>.

I'd like to thank Chairmen Folmer and Dinniman, as well as your fellow committee members, for the opportunity to present testimony today on the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards.

As you have heard, there is a great deal of misunderstanding and, at times, misinformation about the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and how they came to be. I hope my remarks today will clear up some of the confusion surrounding the Common Core, such as the false notion it is a federally driven initiative, that it will force curricula and lesson plans on local school districts and that it will somehow lower the expectations we have for Pennsylvania's students.

I'd like to begin with a brief history of how the Common Core standards came to be and why we need them in the commonwealth. These standards are hardly new, and they didn't just recently emerge into the public policy arena. They have, in fact, been publicly discussed and developed over a number of years as part of a state-led effort.

The Common Core State Standards came about as the result of a 2004 report released by the American Diploma Project (a partnership among Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation) entitled, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. The report was the result of several years' work, with data collected from high school teachers, college professors and business leaders.

The in-depth research uncovered a troubling trend in schools across the country: Many students were graduating from high school woefully unprepared to be successful in college or the workforce. In fact, the report stated: "While students and their parents may still believe that the diploma reflects adequate preparation for the intellectual demands of adult life, in reality it falls far short of this common-sense goal. The diploma has lost value because what it takes to earn one is disconnected from what it takes to compete successfully beyond high school."<sup>i</sup>

To begin to address this issue, the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) launched a state-led initiative in 2008 to provide a clear uniform understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. Pennsylvania, which developed its first statewide academic standards back in the 1990s under former Gov. Tom Ridge, adopted the Common Core standards in July 2010.

The standards were designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers, regardless of where they live. Teachers, parents, school administrators, business leaders and content experts in English and math from across the country, along with state leaders provided input into the development of the standards.<sup>ii</sup>

The standards were developed to be:

- Aligned with college and workforce training expectations;
- Clear, understandable and consistent across states;
- Rigorous in content and in the application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Built on the strengths of current state standards;
- Informed by other top performing countries so students are prepared to succeed in the global economy; and
- Evidence-based.<sup>iii</sup>

Pennsylvania's effort to meet these standards – the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards – necessitates setting higher goals for students and schools across the commonwealth.

Why do we need to do this? Because Pennsylvania's schools, just like schools across the country, have been sending too many kids out into the world unprepared for the rigors they will face beyond high school.

The problem is evident by looking at the large number of students across the commonwealth who receive diplomas despite failing to show proficiency in math and reading. In 2012 alone, Pennsylvania schools gave high school diplomas to nearly 45,000 students despite their failure to show proficiency on their 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSAs or the 12<sup>th</sup> grade retakes.

That amounts to 34 percent – about 1 in 3 – of our public school students graduating despite failing to show proficiency.

We also know that about 1 in 3 Pennsylvania high school graduates who enrolls in a state-owned university or community college cannot pass a first-year college math or English course, and the college-level remediation those students need costs taxpayers about \$26 million a year.

Representatives from the business community and the military know all too well the unfortunate consequences of such a lack of readiness. That's why they've come out in support of the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards.

Among those who have submitted testimony to your committee on the importance of Common Core is (retired) U.S. Army Major General Daniel O'Neill, a member of Mission: Readiness who served our nation for 35 years in the Army and the Pennsylvania Army National Guard and also served as a public school teacher, administrator and superintendent for the Wayne Highlands

School District. Maj. Gen. O'Neill, a skilled aviator, notes that when he was tested to be an instrument-rated pilot, the test he had to pass was internationally benchmarked.

As he puts it: "My check ride for instrument certification was not a Pennsylvania test or a New York test, but an international test. When a pilot begins to land an airplane, we all hope he learned by a Common Core standard and not by an individual state standard."

If we want Pennsylvania's children to succeed – indeed, if we want Pennsylvania to succeed – we have to have a philosophy of high expectations in our public education system. We need to expect more from our students so they can achieve more in life. To do anything less is to set those children up to fail. And if we fail them, we also are failing their parents and the millions of other taxpayers who fund our public education system.

Under the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards:

- There is a common set of learning goals and academic expectations detailing what children are expected to know at each grade level. Under these standards, there is **not** a federally or state-mandated curriculum for Pennsylvania's public schools. Basically, the Common Core stipulates what should be learned. It does not mandate how it should be taught in our schools.
- Pennsylvania's longstanding history of local control will be preserved. Local school officials and educators will continue to be entrusted with key decisions in the day-to-day operations in schools and classrooms. Teachers will continue to decide their own lesson plans, and local officials will continue to choose things like textbooks and other learning materials.
- There is no cap on how rigorous curriculum can be in any of Pennsylvania's schools. Common Core does not set a ceiling for academic expectations, it sets a floor, stipulating what every student needs to know in math and English. If a district wants to set its academic requirements above the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards, it is free to do so.
- There will not be hundreds of millions of dollars in new or unanticipated costs. One estimate (from the Pioneer Institute) claims Pennsylvania will have to spend nearly \$650 million over the next several years to implement the Common Core, but this estimate is based on a series of false assumptions:
  - Much of that estimate – about \$280 million - is supposedly for technology upgrades needed for on-line testing, but because Pennsylvania had decided to use the PSSAs and Keystone Exams, which are available to schools as either on-line or pencil-and-paper formats, there are absolutely no additional technology requirements in Pennsylvania.
  - About \$115 million of the \$650 million estimate is attributed to new textbooks and instructional materials, but on average, Pennsylvania school districts turn over textbooks every four to five years and there is no reason they would need to change that schedule. Because – as noted earlier – Common core does not dictate district-

level decisions like textbook selection, districts could continue on their regular rotation schedule for textbooks, and the Pennsylvania Common Core aligned curriculum and instructional materials are available to districts, at no cost, from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE).

- About \$250 million of the \$650 million estimate is supposedly for professional development. Pennsylvania school districts now spend about \$500 million each year on professional development for the commonwealth's educators, and these existing professional development dollars are being used to provide professional development on the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards.
- There will not be any new data collected or shared about students. Data that already is collected – primarily academic performance data – will continue to be protected by privacy laws and only aggregate data – such as information about an entire school or district – will be shared with state and federal governments.

Why collect any data? Because analyzing data is critical to monitoring student progress, determining what's working and what's not in our schools, and helping teachers make informed decisions about the best way to instruct students. As a reminder, it was the collection and analysis of data that enabled us to realize our schools have been handing out diplomas to some students who were not proficient. It is data that enables you, as lawmakers, to determine how much is being spent in classrooms across the commonwealth and what results we are getting for those investments. It is data that allows us to track whether students are performing better or worse from one year to the next. In short, there is hardly anything sinister or conspiratorial about educators compiling meaningful data related to academics. On the contrary, such data is informative and enlightening.

Here's the bottom line: If we want to truly ensure our high school graduates are ready for the challenges they will face after high school, whether they are going on to post-secondary education, the military or the workforce, we need to recalibrate our expectations and expect more from those students so they can achieve more in the classroom. The high-order problem-solving and critical thinking skills reflected in the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards are what our students will need to succeed.

These standards are not a radical new idea that came out of the blue. They are a long overdue improvement to Pennsylvania's academic standards and reflect the input, knowledge and expectations of many people right here in Pennsylvania who recognize our academic expectations have been lacking and our students, parents and taxpayers deserve better.

Again, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

---

<sup>i</sup> The American Diploma Project, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*; 2004

<sup>ii</sup> [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid