



TESTIMONY

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RECLAIMING LOCAL CONTROL OF EDUCATION: MISSOURI HOUSE BILL 1490

By James V. Shuls, Ph.D.

Testimony Before The Missouri House Education Committee

By adopting Common Core, Missouri has ushered in an era of greater centralized control of our education system. House Bill 1490 will allow Missourians to reclaim that control.

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is the director of education policy at the Show-Me Institute, which promotes market solutions for Missouri public policy.

To the Honorable Members of this Committee:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is James V. Shuls, the director of education policy for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state and local policy. I am a traditionally trained educator, with bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education. I also taught in Missouri public schools. The ideas presented here are my own.

Today, you will hear many compelling testimonies in support of the Common Core State Standards. Supporters of Common Core would have you put blinders on regarding the standards. They say, "Common Core is just standards." That is true. The Common

Core are simply a set of standards that say what students need to know and must be able to do at various grade levels in math and language arts. But viewing Common Core only as standards ignores reality. The fact is that adoption and implementation of the Common Core marks one of the most monumental shifts in education policy for Missouri and the rest of the nation. You see, standards undergird everything in education. By adopting Common Core, Missouri has ushered in an era of greater centralized control of our education system. House Bill 1490 will allow Missourians to reclaim that control.

Common Core Was Not Developed Through A 'State-Led' Process

First, it is important to understand where the Common Core originated. Supporters will have you believe that these standards were developed

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through a “state-led process.” Let me ask you, if it was a state-led process, did you know about it in 2009? Were you invited to any meetings to discuss the Common Core? I bet not.

In 2009, I was a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, working on a Ph.D. in education policy. I was studying under Sandra Stotsky, Ed.D., a member of the Common Core validation team. Stotsky, who had led efforts to re-write Massachusetts’ standards through a truly state-led process, became dismayed that teachers were not being consulted. So she organized a series of informational meetings throughout the state and invited Arkansas Department of Education officials. Those meetings would not have happened had it not been for Stotsky taking the initiative.

I do not know how many, if any, public meetings were held in Missouri during the draft phase of the Common Core. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports that just 257 Missourians provided feedback about the standards.¹ Let me put that into context for you. There are more than 71,000 full-time equivalent teachers and administrators in Missouri and another 1,600 full-time equivalent employees at DESE. Those who commented on the standards represent approximately three-thousandths of 1 percent of Missouri’s educators. They represent just five-hundredths of 1 percent of all administrators. That hardly constitutes a state-led process.

Jim Stergios, executive director of the Boston-based Pioneer Institute, poignantly stated that “A state-led process is not when a couple of state bureaucrats attend meetings in Washington D.C., held in the offices of one of the two not-for-profits that hold

the copyright on Common Core. If that is proponents’ view of a state-led process, they misunderstand and frankly don’t value public processes and the public trust, which are the cornerstones of a representative democracy.”

The truth is, Missouri, like other states, signed on to the Common Core initiative before the standards were written in hopes that they could land federal Race to the Top dollars. The federal government further incentivized states to adopt the Common Core with promises of waivers to No Child Left Behind. The U.S. Department of Education was not a benign influence in this so-called “state-led process.”

Standards Undergird the Entire Educational System

Common Core supporters also claim the standards will not dictate curriculum or instructional practices. I find these claims to be disingenuous and factually incorrect. As I have written before, “Curriculum standards don’t tell teachers how to teach in the same way that a high jump bar doesn’t tell a jumper how to jump. You could theoretically jump over a high jump bar in whatever way you would like; but because of how the jump is structured, there is a clear advantage to doing the old Fosbury Flop.”² You cannot have standards in isolation because standards and curriculum are inseparable.

This is what I mean when I say the Common Core has far-reaching implications. If you have centrally mandated standards, you need tests aligned to those standards and you need textbooks and curriculum aligned to the tests. Moreover, you need teachers trained to deliver material in accordance with the textbooks and curriculum. By adopting Common Core, Missouri and other states have significantly

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impacted every part of our education system, from pre-K through college.

Common Core Will Not Lead To Better Results

Some might argue that all of this is irrelevant. What matters is whether the standards are good standards. This is a legitimate question and well-regarded scholars may disagree on the answer. In fact, five of the 25 individuals on the Common Core validation committee refused to sign off on the standards.³ The thing is, evaluating standards is a subjective process. It is an opinion. Some examine the standards and conclude they are great. Others examine the standards and conclude they are not. No one can make his or her claim definitively.

Moreover, there is no evidence that standards themselves, even supposedly rigorous standards, lead to better outcomes. Evaluations at the state and national levels have found no relationship between standards and student achievement. Tom Loveless, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, wrote, “The empirical evidence suggests that the Common Core will have little effect on American students’ achievement.”⁴

There is simply no evidence to suggest that the Common Core State Standards

will put Missouri students on the path to success. However, as I have discussed, the *de facto* national standards infringe upon local control of education. And they leave the door open for greater federal involvement in our education system.

HB 1490 Helps Reclaim Local Control

House Bill 1490, as it currently stands, would prevent the state board of education and DESE from adopting or implementing the Common Core State Standards. Additionally, it would require the Missouri General Assembly to approve future statewide education standards.

No offense, but I have no more desire to have you and your counterparts dictate standards and curriculum than I desire DESE and the state board of education to dictate standards and curriculum.

The beauty of this bill is that it almost precludes statewide standards from even being dictated. Rather, local school boards, principals, teachers, and parents would choose the standards applicable to their students. Thus, this bill returns power back to the local level, where I believe it should be.

This is not an “anti-standards” bill. It is a bill that disputes the idea that a world-class education must come from a centralized education system.

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NOTES

¹ See “Common Core State Standards Q & A.” View online here: http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/curriculum/documents/CSSSQ_A.pdf.

² Shuls, James V. (2013). “Constructive Criticism for Common Core Constructivism Deniers.” *Jay P. Greene’s Blog*. View online at: <http://jaypgreene.com/2013/03/21/constructive-criticism-for-common-core-constructivism-deniers/>.

³ Stotsky, Sandra. (2012). Testimony for a hearing on Indiana Senate Bill No. 373. View online here: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/Stotsky_Testimony_for_Indiana.pdf.

⁴ Loveless, Tom. (2012). “How well are American students learning?” The Brookings Institution. View online here: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/2/brown%20center/0216_brown_education_loveless.pdf.



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