



IDAHO FREEDOM FOUNDATION

Idaho State Department of Education
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Boise, ID 83702

Public comment filed July 10, 2019, on Idaho Content Standards public hearing review

To whom it may concern:

Idahoans are frustrated with stagnant student test scores, high school students unprepared for college, and curriculum updated with inflexible Common Core Standards, which haven't yielded the promised results.

The Idaho Freedom Foundation presents the viewpoint of many concerned Idahoans as we urge policymakers to repeal Idaho Content Standards and adopt locally controlled standards more rigorous and beneficial to Idaho students. In particular, this public comment regards Idaho's Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) standards, euphemistically known as "Idaho Content Standards."

Federally promoted Common Core content standards were adopted by nearly every state — including Idaho — between 2010-2012. However, controversy abounded: Parents, educators, and school officials complained about how Common Core was rammed down states' throats by the federal government, its pedagogically untested methods of teaching, and its dumbed-down content. Common Core got such a bad reputation that to avoid protests, many states agreed to repeal or roll back the standards. Idaho was one of these states and in 2017 adopted the Idaho Content Standards for English Language Arts, which the State Department of Education assured parents was different from the old Common Core standards.

However, the Department of Education was not upfront with Idahoans. The supposedly new Idaho Content Standards for English Language Arts are functionally identical to the controversial Common Core State Standards. A side-by-side comparison of Idaho's old Common Core state standards (adopted in 2011) and the current Idaho Content Standards (adopted in 2017) reveals that the vast majority of content was copied word-for-word. Below are the changes:

The new Idaho Content Standards removed several paragraphs of exposition present in Common Core standards (for example, compare page 22 of the old and new standards). No actual standards were removed.

- The new standards updated the dates of the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress to the 2015 National Assessment of Education Progress.
- The new standards added less than half a page on handwriting standards. This is by far

the most substantive change, and it consists of requiring students to learn cursive.

- The new standards added one bullet point to high school Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, saying that students should be able to “use precise, domain-specific language” and “respond to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of readers.”

All in all, the supposedly new Idaho-specific ELA standards are essentially identical to the old, controversial Common Core standards. Not a single Common Core standard was actually changed or eliminated.

The Idaho Freedom Foundation objects to this on two fronts: First, it’s deceptive to promise Idaho parents and students a new set of curriculum standards, yet merely change the window dressing. Parents rejected Common Core and requested Idaho reconsider. However, the Idaho Department of Education did not respect their wishes.

Second, the fact that new Idaho ELA Content Standards and previous Common Core Standards are the same highlights a major problem with Common Core: the inability to change. Common Core Standards are copyrighted and must be used “for purposes that support the Common Core State Standards Initiative” (CCSSI). In practice, the CCSSI defined adoption to mean the authorizing authority (the state or school board) must adopt Common Core “word for word, with the option of adding up to an additional 15% of standards on top of the core.”

These unadaptable standards have not benefited students. Since adopting Common Core state standards, Idaho students have not performed better on tests in English Language Arts. Scores on the Idaho Reading Indicator (which tests first- through third-graders on reading proficiency) have been trending downwards or flat for years. Although preliminary 2019 Idaho reading test scores indicate a slight upward nudge, the reading indicator has changed in recent years, so it is difficult to assess changes across several years. As concerns the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), Idaho hasn’t made progress. Over the years, NAEP eighth grade reading scores nudged slightly upward, while fourth-grade reading scores have wavered, but are lower than they were pre-Common Core.

On a nation-wide scale, Common Core standards have produced similarly lackluster results. Federally funded researchers recently evaluated the results of Common Core. They reported, “Contrary to our expectation, we found that [Common Core] had significant negative effects on fourth-graders’ reading achievement during the seven years after the adoption of the new standards ... based on analyses of NAEP composite scores.” These researchers were part of the initial federal Common Core push, yet they theorized that had Common Core never been implemented, test scores for today’s students would be higher than they are. Furthermore, the researchers found Common Core’s negative effects actually worsen over time, meaning a rough implementation period likely isn’t to blame for falling test scores.

There are several fundamental flaws with Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards that

actually decrease college readiness, critical thinking skills, and essential literacy development for students subjected to the standards.

First, Common Core standards recommend increased focus on informational and technical texts, suggesting students read a 50/50 blend of informational texts and literature. While the purpose behind this method is admirable — everyone wants high school students able to understand complex, college-level texts — the 50/50 blend itself doesn't help students develop advanced reading skills. Sandra Stotsky, Professor Emerita of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and developer of the lauded Massachusetts ELA standards, explained that Common Core was designed with the thought that since many students aren't prepared for high-level technical reading and writing in college, the solution is to introduce more technical, info-based learning at a younger age.

But that's not how learning works for low-comprehension students. Stotsky writes, "Low-performing students have not been assigned complex textbooks or literary texts because, generally speaking, they can't read them and, in fact, don't read much of anything with academic content." It is by reading interesting literature and classics, Stotsky explains, "and slowly building up a vocabulary of comprehension that higher levels of comprehension and complexity become accessible." Unfortunately, the type of literature required to build fundamental academic vocabulary are the very books de-emphasized by Common Core, leaving students with underdeveloped reading skills.

Second, as English Teacher D'Lee Pollock-Moore points out, Common Core ELA standards "fail to understand that one of the fundamentals of teaching literature involves character education." Reading builds wisdom and plunges students into lives and experiences they could otherwise not acquire. Pollock-Moore continues, "When we read a work such as 'Walden' by Henry David Thoreau or 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' by Martin Luther King Jr., we internalize those works. They change our hearts. They help us become better people. They create a national ethos." Though Common Core talks about identifying themes and "analyzing their development" in a text, Pollock-Moore argues, the standards have nothing to say about how the themes and morals apply to students' lives.

For example, a skilled teacher might ask, "Is what the author says true? Is that a good thing? Where do you think the author is wrong, and why?" When a teacher insists students develop their own thoughts and opinions about a work, it encourages students to think deeply about the text. It helps them build character, hone their judgement, and thrive as rational individuals with their own discrete opinions.

Idaho Content Standards for English Language Arts fall victim to both of these fundamental flaws: The standards counterproductively emphasize informational texts, and they neglect to foster students' individual development through reading. As a result, Idaho students (and students nationwide) have not received as good an education as they were promised.

However, there is a simple solution: Reject Common Core Standards and give Idahoans substantive control over ELA standards. There are plenty of acclaimed standards (such as Massachusetts' English Language Arts Standards, the highest-rated state standards prior to the implementation of Common Core) available for Idaho to adopt and adjust freely.

The Idaho Freedom Foundation urges education policy makers to fulfill their promise to concerned Idahoans and help Idaho students flourish with a deeper and richer education in English Language Arts by repealing the Idaho Common Core English Language Arts standards.

Thank you,

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