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TESTIMONY

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MISSOURI SHOULD AVOID IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON CORE

By James V. Shuls

Testimony Before The Missouri Senate Education Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is James V. Shuls and I am the education policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state policy issues. The ideas presented here are my own. This testimony is intended to explain why Missourians should not allow the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to implement the Common Core State Standards without legislative approval.

First, I will discuss the arguments that supposedly support adoption

of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and demonstrate why these arguments are vacuous. Moreover, I will demonstrate that if the real objective of CCSS is the centralized planning of education standards, then the CCSS do not go far enough. Next, I will offer what I suggest will be the real impact of implementing the CCSS.

ARE THERE GOOD REASONS TO SUPPORT THE COMMON CORE?

In a letter submitted to Missouri legislators, Margie Vandeven, deputy commissioner for learning services at DESE, articulates four “advantages of the Common Core State Standards.” Presumably, these advantages are the reason we should abandon our current standards in favor of the Common Core.

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Advantage 1: Better Standards

The whole crux of the argument for CCSS is that it will help students improve because it will institute a better system of standards. I have two major concerns with this idea. First, it is not clear to me that standards dictate performance. Take, for example, the District of Columbia. In a report by the Fordham Institute on the quality of academic standards, the authors conclude that the English language arts standards in D.C. are “clearly superior” to the Common Core State Standards.¹ Though D.C.’s language arts standards are among the best in the nation, no one would claim that the D.C. school system is to be heralded. While it seems logical that implementing a more rigorous standard would improve the quality of education, I believe the real improvement comes from what individual teachers are doing in the classroom.

Nevertheless, let’s assume that increasing standards will lead to improved student achievement; I am not convinced that these standards are significantly better to the point that they will yield learning gains. Notable scholars in English language arts² and mathematics³ have voiced significant concerns about the rigor of the CCSS. In fact, five of the 25 individuals on the Common Core validation committee refused to sign off on the standards.⁴

Ultimately, how high or low you rate the CCSS depends on the *standard* by which you evaluate the standards. While the standards may be more

rigorous than most states, even the most generous of evaluators concedes that the CCSS are not the best standards out there.

Conclusion: The CCSS are not the best standards and do not merit the state’s adoption of them.

Advantage 2: Internationally Benchmarked

Deputy Commissioner Vandeven states, “The Common Core State Standards are internationally benchmarked. They are designed to prepare our students for a global economy.”⁵ International benchmarking means drafters of the CCSS examined what high-performing nations require students to do at specific grade levels and used those *benchmarks* to set the CCSS.

Using a series of state, national, and international tests, researchers at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) benchmarked state performance standards to international standards.⁶ This differs from the Thomas B. Fordham study of standards in that the Fordham study looked at the standards to determine how rigorous they were, whereas the AIR study looked at what students were required to do on achievement exams. The researchers at AIR found that Missouri’s marks for proficiency were relatively high in comparison to other states. In fact, our requirements for proficiency in fourth grade were the second-most rigorous requirements in the country. All this is to say, our current standards are also internationally benchmarked and we know at what level they are

pegged. Until the CCSS tests are developed, we will not know to what level the new standards have been benchmarked.

Conclusion: International benchmarking is not a reason to adopt the CCSS. Our own standards already are internationally benchmarked.

Advantage 3: A National Network for Collaboration

Supporters of the CCSS suggest these nationally adopted standards will help teachers improve their craft because it allows them to collaborate and learn from teachers throughout the country. It is not clear, however, that this will be the case. School districts already spend a significant amount of money on professional development and teachers routinely collaborate within schools, districts, and across the country. In fact, there are hundreds of websites that enable teachers to do just that. One example that has gained much attention recently is Teacherspayteachers.com, where teachers are able to share or sell their lessons with other teachers throughout the country. We have not needed a system of national standards to facilitate this sharing; we simply need teachers looking for interesting and effective ways to teach their students.

Conclusion: The fact of the matter is that teachers already collaborate regularly, so collaboration is not a reason to adopt the CCSS.

Advantage 4: Helps Mobile Students

Supporters of the CCSS suggest that having a consistent curriculum across states would minimize learning gaps for students who move across state lines. According to the U.S. Census, approximately 2 percent of all people move across state lines in a given year.⁷ I am not sure it is good to set policy for such a small portion of the population. Moreover, I am not sure that having common standards actually would help those students who move across state lines. Although the CCSS dictate what students should learn in a given year, they do not dictate the sequence of the learning topics. A student may learn some material in one state, then move to Missouri and find the teacher re-teaching the content he has already learned or that the lessons are further along than they were in the previous school.

Conclusion: CCSS will not solve the problem of learning gaps associated with student mobility.

WHAT DO WE REALLY GET FROM COMMON CORE?

The arguments for the CCSS are basically those of big government and centralized planning. If we accept those arguments, then the CCSS simply do not go far enough. Rather, we should implement global standards that dictate what teachers teach each day. That way, we could arguably minimize the learning losses that come from transferring from one school to another, we would be internationally the same as other nations, and we could maximize

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the teacher learning community. The bottom line is that there is little reason to believe the CCSS will actually lead to an improved education system in Missouri. Now, let's look at what we will get from implementing the CCSS.

Bills, Bills, Bills

Implementing the CCSS will increase educational expenses. The Missouri Association of School Administrators indicates that fewer than half of all district officials believe they have the necessary technological infrastructure necessary to administer the computer-based tests that will come with the CCSS.⁸ The cost of updating their technology will be substantial. Moreover, school districts will need to purchase CCSS-aligned curriculum, and teachers will need to undergo professional development. It has been estimated that implementing the CCSS will cost Missouri as much as \$67.8 million in the best-case scenario.⁹ At worst, the CCSS could cost as much as \$281 million for Missouri taxpayers.¹⁰

Implementing these standards will be extremely costly. In comparison, the sequester, which many have been up in arms about, will only cost Missouri \$11.9 million for elementary and secondary education funding and \$10.8 million for students with special needs.¹¹ That means the bare bones approach to implementing the CCSS will cost three times as much as the sequester.

Loss of Local Control

As it is, Missouri retains sole authority to set our standards and the level required to achieve proficiency on state tests. By implementing the CCSS, we are ceding that authority to a consortium where we will have one small voice. Furthermore, we will be removing the standard setting process one step further away from the individual parent. If a parent has an issue with the standards in their child's school, who should they approach? Their teacher, principal, and local school board will not have the authority to make changes and even DESE officials will have little influence in altering or improving the standards.

Limited Choices

Proponents of the CCSS like that students across the country will be learning the same things. But what if you do not like what your local school is doing? For instance, the CCSS do not require students to develop fluency with standard algorithms for multi-digit addition and subtraction until fourth grade. I, for one, want my children developing proficiency with standard algorithms at a much earlier age.¹² Others have expressed serious concern about lack of classic literature in the language arts standards.¹³ Whatever the problem, local education officials will have no authority to change the standards. If you move, you will be moving to another district that is using the same standards. If you do not like the standards, the only

way to escape would be to move to a state that does not have them or to pull your child from public schools. Even then, nationally implemented standards will limit choices because they will induce textbook companies and other education service providers to align with the new standards. That means private schools and homeschool parents will have few curricular options that are not aligned to the CCSS.

CONCLUSION

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the CCSS in order to obtain a waiver from No Child Left Behind.¹⁴ In doing so, they have committed Missouri schools to untold millions of dollars in expenses related to the implementation of the standards. Missourians have been told that these standards will help our state improve so we can meet our goal to be in the top 10 states in academic achievement by the year 2020.¹⁵ The fact of the matter is that Missourians have been sold a bill of goods regarding the CCSS.

The CCSS are not the most rigorous standards; even proponents of the CCSS recognize this. By implementing these standards we gain nothing, but we lose very much.

- We lose millions of dollars to CCSS implementation that could be spent elsewhere.

- We lose the authority to set our own standards and to be in control of our curricular decisions at the local level.
- We limit options for Missouri families.

If you believe the arguments in favor of the CCSS, then you should take those arguments out to their logical conclusion. You should advocate for international standards that dictate what a teacher should teach in a class every day. After all, the argument for the CCSS is that the government knows best and that we must have a uniform system of instruction. In my opinion, centralized standard setting is not the best path forward and government planning of instruction is not the pathway to success. Here, I agree with the sentiment of noted education scholar Jay P. Greene in his testimony before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Early Education, Elementary, and Secondary Education:

I believe this centralized approach is mistaken. The best way to produce high academic standards and better student learning is by decentralizing the process of determining standards, curriculum, and assessments. When we have choice and competition among different sets of standards, curricula, and assessments, they tend to improve in quality to better suit student needs and result in better outcomes.¹⁶

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If Missouri leaders are truly dedicated to improving Missouri's education system and to leapfrogging us into the top 10 by 2020, then walking lockstep with every other state is not the way to go. Putting the structures in place for innovation, choice, and competition are the real pathway toward an improved education system.

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NOTES

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