

# spotlight

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## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

*The way forward*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The NC General Assembly should create two permanent commissions that would be charged with raising the quality and rigor of state English Language Arts and mathematics standards, curricula, and assessments.
- Each commission should employ a large and diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, curriculum and content area experts, policy professionals, practitioners, parents, community leaders, school board members, state education officials, and state legislators.
- The goals of the commissions should be to:
  1. modify or replace the Common Core State Standards;
  2. specify content that aligns with the standards;
  3. recommend a valid, reliable, and cost-effective testing program that aligns to the standards and content;
  4. provide ongoing review of the standards, curriculum, and tests throughout implementation.

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In 2011, Lindsay Burke of the Heritage Foundation outlined a three-prong exit strategy for states that desire to abandon the Common Core State Standards.<sup>1</sup> Burke wrote that the first step should be to identify the state's standard-setting authority, which in North Carolina is the State Board of Education. Second, she recommends that state legislators and local education officials prohibit future spending on Common Core. The NC General Assembly partly achieved this goal by passing legislation that requires approval of Common Core assessments prior to adoption. Finally, she implores elected officials to develop a plan to reverse course, a process that has begun in North Carolina with the creation of the NC General Assembly's Legislative Research Commission (LRC) Committee on Common Core State Standards.

Currently, members of the LRC Committee on Common Core State Standards are deliberating about the future of the Common Core in the state. Legislators formed the committee in response to concerns voiced by an ideologically diverse group of parents, teachers, and citizens who worry about the long- and short-term effects of the Standards on public education in North Carolina.

To aid in this effort, I have outlined a plan that will address some, but not all, of their anxieties. Conservatives will be disappointed that the plan does not simply scrap the Common Core Standards immediately. Liberals will dislike the proposal because it maintains so-called "high stakes" testing.

The segments of the Common Core opposition that resist state standards and testing are not representative of organizations, such as the John Locke Foundation, that have spent years championing strong and accurate accountability measures in our public schools. Modifying or abandoning Common Core should not be synonymous with scrapping standards or testing in favor of a system that does little to ensure that public schools are raising student achievement or spending taxpayers' money productively.

That said, this plan is not an endorsement of Common Core as it exists today. On several occasions, my colleagues and I have identified shortcomings of the Common Core initiative, from the lack of transparency to deficiencies in the Standards themselves. I argue that some of these problems can be solved through the deliberative process discussed below.

### **Legislative Action and Commission Work**

Before the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) developed academic standards for all core subject areas and grades. The department's recommendations were approved by the NC State Board of Education (NC SBE) and subsequently implemented in the state's public schools.

While standards for most subjects and grades followed this practice, in 2010 state education officials opted to approve mathematics and English Language Arts standards developed by three external entities – the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Governors Association (NGA), and Achieve, Inc. By adopting Common Core Standards, NC DPI has established a precedent of relying on external entities to develop standards.

And, while flawed, Common Core is arguably better than North Carolina's previous math and English standards. The Fordham Institute's review of North Carolina's 2004 English Language Arts standards pointed out,

*The North Carolina Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts is one of the most befuddling sets of standards reviewed for this report [of standards in the 50 states and Washington, D.C.]. It is difficult to describe its organization and purpose, for neither is obvious to the reader. The standards are jam-packed with jargon and littered with generic skills that appear in multiple strands (often nonacademic skills, such as personal reflection). Glimpses of good content can be found in early reading, vocabulary, analysis of arguments, and even conventions, but in many places the standards are devoid of academic content.*<sup>2</sup>

Fordham awarded North Carolina’s English standards a D grade. North Carolina’s 2009 mathematics standards also received a D, but their evaluation was more tempered. Fordham evaluators wrote,

North Carolina’s standards are well presented and easy to read. However, they are often poorly phrased and difficult to interpret. In the K-8 material, arithmetic is moderately prioritized, but the development is inadequate. The high school content is sometimes strong, sometimes not.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, standards developed by the NC Department of Public Instruction were defective and even far inferior to the flawed Common Core Standards. In fact, the NC Department of Public Instruction readily admits that state-authored standards lacked the rigor of the Common Core Standards. In “13 Things to Know about Common Core State Standards in North Carolina,” NC DPI officials concede, “The Common Core State Standards are more rigorous than North Carolina’s

earlier standards.”<sup>4</sup> As such, it makes little sense to entrust NC DPI with a task – development of rigorous, clear, and coherent standards – that they have failed to perform adequately in the past.

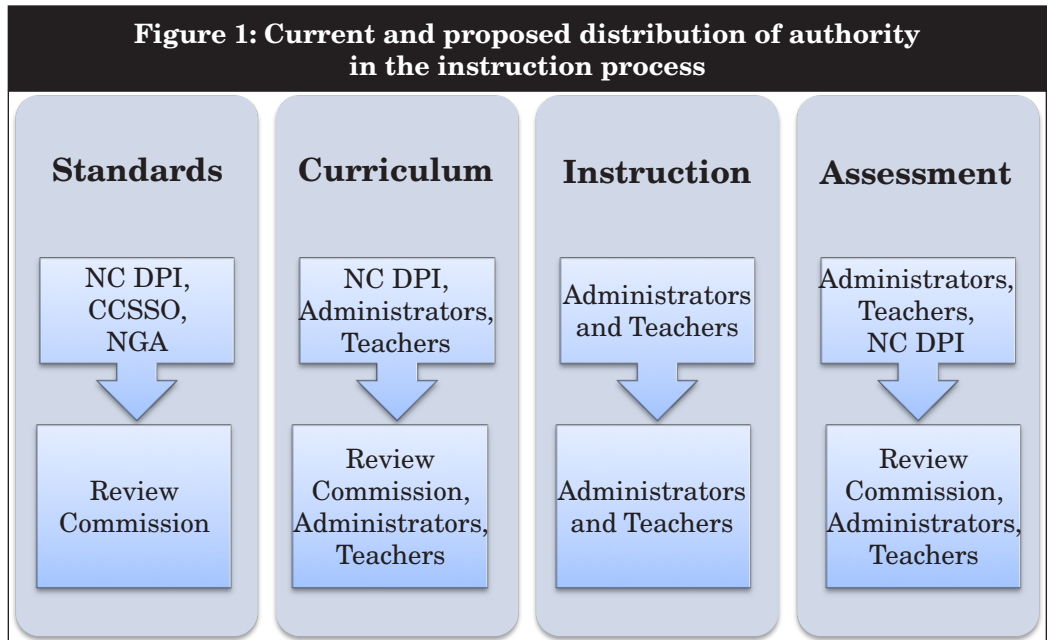
I propose the formation of two permanent standards, curriculum, and assessment commissions – one for English language arts and one for mathematics. Common Core opponent and leftwing commentator Diane Ravitch recently proposed a similar idea. In a January 2014 Modern Language Association presentation, Ravitch said,

In every state, teachers should work together to figure out how the standards can be improved. Professional associations like the National Council for the Teaching of English and the National Council for the Teaching of Mathematics should participate in a process by which the standards are regularly reviewed, revised, and updated by classroom teachers and scholars to respond to genuine problems in the field.<sup>5</sup>

North Carolina could become one of the first states to implement such a plan, that is, establish a commission of teachers, scholars, and others that, with the approval of the NC State Board of Education, would review, revise, and update state standards regularly.

Authorizing legislation would distribute appointment power to the NC House and Senate leadership, Governor McCrory, and Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson. Each would have discretion to appoint a specified number of stakeholders from across the state to one of the two commissions. Each commission should include,

- Public school teachers and administrators from charter and district schools throughout North Carolina;
- Curriculum and policy experts from the NC Department of Public Instruction, community colleges, private and public universities, and nonprofit organizations;



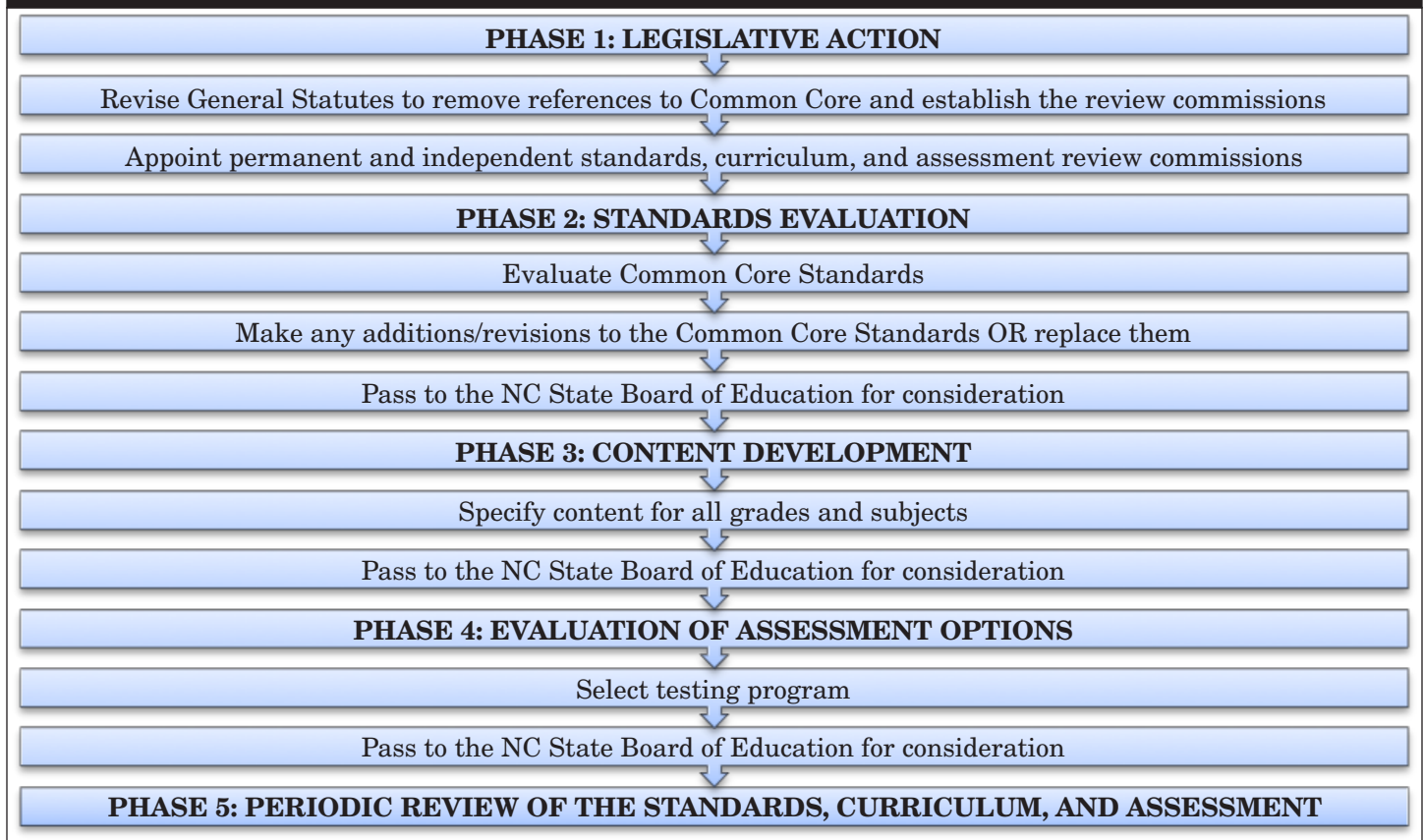
- Practitioners and content experts, e.g. mathematicians, engineers, editors, writers, journalists, etc. from institutions of higher education, and the public, private, and nonprofit sectors;
- Parents and community leaders;
- School board members;
- State education officials; and
- State legislators.

Given the scope of the project, each commission would need to have at least 14 appointees (one for each grade and a chairperson) and a sizable support staff. Because the commission would originate in the NC General Assembly, state legislative leaders would provide the vast majority of appointees.

The commissions' work would be split into four parts (See Figure 1). After the legislature creates the commissions, members would begin the process of standards evaluation. Commission members would determine whether the existing standards should be modified or replaced. Each commission would then initiate the process of modifying the current Common Core Standards or selecting existing, "off the shelf" standards. While the process would draw on the expertise of members, the commissions should actively solicit input from North Carolinians, particularly teachers, to guide their work. Every stage of the commission's work should be transparent and easily accessible through a dedicated website.

This approach recognizes that other state legislators have had mixed results executing plans to assess public school standards. To date, at least 20 states have had Common Core exit legislation or resolutions introduced in

**Figure 2: Proposed five-step education reform plan**



their state legislatures. The Indiana General Assembly recently passed a bill that would initiate the process of replacing the Standards. Most legislation introduced by lawmakers simply directs the state's education agency to halt implementation of the Standards and/or withdraw from a testing consortium. Some of the introduced bills also defund Common Core related activities.

Indiana House Bill 1427 is the most comprehensive of the lot. Their Common Core withdrawal strategy has three parts.

1. The law mandates that the Common Core Standards remain in effect until the Indiana State Board of Education selects new standards that “use the common core standards as the base model for academic standards.” Nevertheless, the law prohibits the education board from implementing Common Core Standards or assessments any further. In addition, the legislature requires the state to continue the administration of Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP) tests.

2. The standards adoption process requires the following components:

- A review by the Indiana Department of Education,
- A final report by a legislative study committee,
- A fiscal impact statement from the Office of Management and Budget, and
- Three public meetings.

The legislative study committee is charged with comparing existing Indiana standards with the Common Core Standards and considering best practices in developing and adopting the standards. The committee must include subject area teachers from elementary and secondary schools and subject area instructors and experts from postsecondary educational institutions in the state. In addition, committee discussion must include “any other standards the study committee considers to be superior to Common Core.”

3. The bill was effective July 1, 2013 and mandated adoption of new standards before July 1, 2014. In other words, the Indiana General Assembly allotted one year for the review and adoption of standards.

If the Indiana experience is any indication, dropping or modifying Common Core in states that adopted it is easier said than done. Although the Indiana General Assembly paused implementation of the Standards and formed a legislative committee to examine them, the twelve members of the bipartisan committee were unable to come to a consensus about Common Core.<sup>6</sup> In one instance, a resolution to drop Common Core Standards did not receive a majority of votes because five of the six Democratic representatives on the committee boycotted the meeting.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, we can learn two lessons from the Indiana experience. First, it is important to map out a multi-year strategy and timeline before review begins. Second, a review committee should include, but not be limited to, state legislators.

## **Standards: Beyond Common Core**

To move beyond the current Common Core Standards, the state must choose one of four options.

1. The state could jettison Common Core immediately and charge NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to begin the process of developing an alternative set of English language arts and mathematics standards from scratch.

Unfortunately, the process of finding an alternative would likely require North Carolina's public schools to go without standards, and therefore accountability, for multiple school years. As mentioned above, many of the same people and organizations that called for immediately scrapping Common Core have also railed against the mediocrity of their state's standards, curricula, and tests. For states like North Carolina, for example, Common Core is an



improvement over standards formulated previously by NC DPI. Resuscitating the state's former educational program would be a step in the wrong direction.

2. The state could also add 15 percent to the Standards as permitted by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association.

While it is tempting to think of the "15 percent rule" as a way to reclaim ownership of the Standards, the costs of modifying such a small share may outweigh any benefits.<sup>8</sup>

3. The third option is to ignore the Standards.

Given that educational standards establish expectations for all North Carolina students, it is not feasible to simply pretend that they do not exist.

4. The final alternative is to keep the Common Core Standards in place temporarily and create an independent review commission that either modifies Common Core or adopts an alternative.

Although not ideal, the proposal outlined here recommends that the state retain the Common Core State Standards until the commission makes a choice to either

- a. modify the Common Core State Standards based on the recommendations of appointees, public school personnel, and the public; or
- b. adopt a superior, "off the shelf" alternative, such as Sandra Stotsky's "An English Language Arts Curriculum Framework for American Public Schools."<sup>9</sup> Stotsky's used Massachusetts's celebrated English standards as a basis for her "curriculum framework."

By keeping the Common Core until a determination is made, the commission would avoid the problem of lacking standards and accountability during the standards review and/or development process. In addition, it would smooth the transition to new standards for North Carolina's teachers and administrators.

After completing a review of the standards, stakeholders from across North Carolina would develop The North Carolina Foundations of Achievement (NCFA), a content-rich curriculum that would align with the new standards and provide the foundation for classroom instruction and testing.

Why is this step necessary? One of the main problems with relying heavily on standards to dictate curriculum and instruction is that the standards may be misinterpreted or misapplied by those implementing them. For this reason, we believe that the NCFA should also include a content component developed by North Carolinians.

### **Beyond Standards: The need for a common, content-rich curriculum**

Standards reform alone will only get the public school students in the state so far. Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution predicted that the Common Core State Standards would have little to no effect on student achievement, because there is no apparent relationship between the quality or rigor of state standards and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Loveless points out,

The Common Core will sit on top of the implemented and attained curriculums, and notwithstanding future efforts to beef up the standards' power to penetrate to the core of schooling, they will probably fail to dramatically affect what goes on in the thousands of districts and tens of thousands of schools that they seek to influence.<sup>10</sup>

Loveless speculates that variations in the "implemented curriculum" – what teachers teach – and the "attained curriculum" – what students learn – has more bearing on student achievement than what standards alone provide, that is, the "intended curriculum." For this reason, standards reform is not enough.

To this end, the NCFA will be a rigorous state-developed curriculum that would use the revised Common Core State Standards (or another set of standards) for what they were originally intended to be – a very general outline of what we expect children to know in math and English at each grade level.

This should not suggest that content should be scripted, although some schools may choose to adopt this approach. Given that schools and classrooms include students of varying ability and need, delivering content requires

teachers to use their skills as educators to effectively teach the content prescribed in the NCFA. Indeed, one of the strengths of the NCFA concept is that districts, schools, and teachers would no longer have the burden of deriving content from the standards, allowing them to focus on the organization and delivery of content.

The proposal to standardize content may be confusing to many, particularly those who assume that standards and curricula are the same thing. In the Common Core debate, definitions of key terms, such as “standards” and “curriculum,” vary considerably. In “Curriculum’ Definition Raises Red Flags,” *Education Week* reporter Catherine Gewertz pointed out that disagreements over the definition of “curriculum” led to widespread confusion about how states and school districts should implement the Common Core Standards. For some, standards and curricula are one in the same. For others, standards are a framework by which curricular content is developed.

Much of the confusion originates from the way states defined and used these terms before adoption of Common Core. For example, definitions of “curriculum” that make it indistinguishable from “instruction” often occur in situations where individual or small groups of teachers are responsible for developing the curriculum locally (See Figure 3).

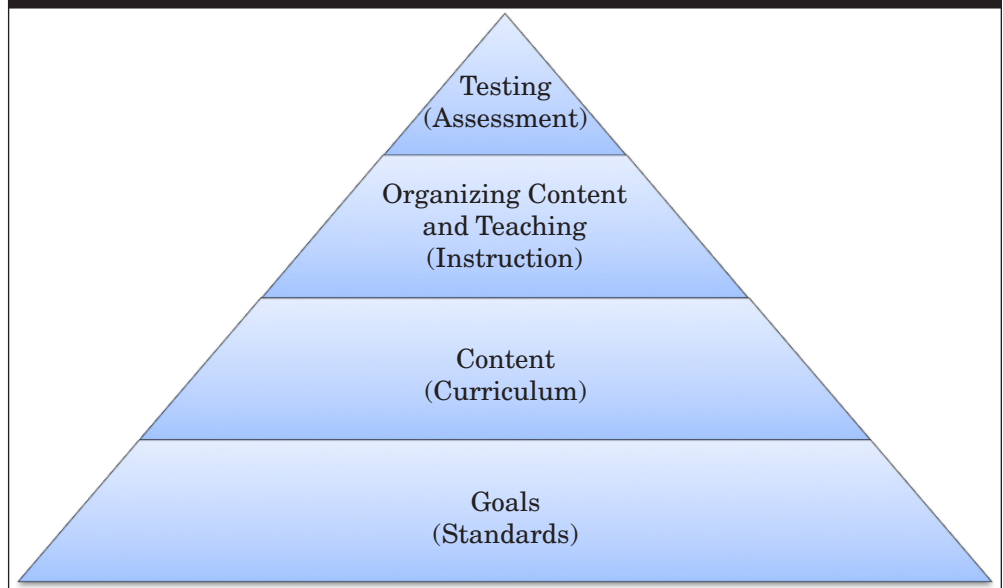
On the other hand, developers and defenders of the Common Core State Standards repeatedly draw a definitive distinction between “standards” and “curriculum.” Consider the following statements from three separate documents accessible on the Common Core State Standards Initiative website:

- “Fact: The *Standards* are not a curriculum.”<sup>11</sup>
- “Standards are not curriculum.”<sup>12</sup>
- “Furthermore, while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.”<sup>13</sup>

Proponents of the Standards consistently make the same distinction.

- “Standards are not curriculum: *standards* spell out what students should know and be able to do at the end of a year; *curriculum* defines the specific course of study—the scope and sequence—that will enable students to

**Figure 3: The four major parts of the instructional process**



meet standards. There are many possible curricula schools could use that would lead students to the Common Core State Standards.”<sup>14</sup>

- [T]he Standards require a “content-rich curriculum” that is “intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.”<sup>15</sup>

Simply put, the Common Core State Standards are not a curriculum and do not specify content. Nothing suggests that they should be treated as such. Rothman’s definitions of “standards” and “curriculum” in the first bullet point above provide a good starting point for understanding the distinction between the two. Standards are broad goals. Curricula include specific course content. Arguably, the latter is just as important, perhaps even more so, as the former.

Research suggests that standards are successful insofar as they are buttressed by a content-rich curriculum. According to Lisa Hansel,

Many school districts mandate specific pedagogies, but not specific content. I think this is backwards. Effective instruction depends on the content to be learned and the students in the room, so pedagogical mandates are often counterproductive. What to teach ought to be a communal, research-based, and experience-based decision; how to teach should be up to the individual teacher.

The content of instruction is so important that any responsible community should be willing to do the hard work of specifying and agreeing to what students need to know and be able to do by the end of each grade.

**Figure 4: Example of standard and content**

Grade	Standard	Curriculum Content
3	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning word and phrases based on grade 3 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies	<p>Know what prefixes and suffixes are and how the following affect word meaning:</p> <p>Prefixes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• re meaning “again” (as in reuse, refill)</li> <li>• un meaning “not” (as in unfriendly, unpleasant)</li> <li>• dis meaning “not” (as in dishonest, disobey)</li> <li>• un meaning “opposite of” or “reversing an action” (as in untie, unlock)</li> <li>• dis meaning “opposite of” or “reversing an action” (as in disappear, dismount)</li> </ul> <p>Suffixes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• er and or (as in singer, painter, actor)</li> <li>• less (as in careless, hopeless)</li> <li>• ly (as in quickly, calmly)</li> </ul> <p>Know what homophones are (for example, by, buy; hole, whole) and correct usage of homophones that commonly cause problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• their, there, they’re</li> <li>• your, you’re</li> <li>• its, it’s</li> <li>• here, hear</li> <li>• to, too, two</li> </ul> <p>Recognize common abbreviations (for example, St., Rd., Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr., U.S.A., ft., in., lb.).</p> <p>(Core Knowledge Sequence, p. 80-81)</p>



With grade-by-grade content, a state could also develop better tests: Specifying course content and testing a sample of it is what our most highly regarded programs—Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate—do. Preparing for these tests (unlike typical state tests that are not anchored to specific content) means developing knowledge and related skills.

My hunch is that shared content appeals to far more teachers than policymakers realize. Many teachers find selecting content frustrating because students in our current, incoherent system have enormous variety in their knowledge and skills. Many teachers enjoy the communal process of agreeing upon content. Many more enjoy the result: time to focus on how to teach each student.<sup>16</sup>

Hansel identifies two statewide approaches to curriculum development – the New York approach and the Massachusetts approach.

New York provided curricular resources to teachers without mandating that they adopt any one of them. The NC Department of Public Instruction has adopted a similar approach by offering “unpacked” standards, LiveBinder resources, and a wiki page.

Conversely, state education officials in Massachusetts chose to align content-rich curricula to standards. Hansel points out that the state did not mandate a teaching method or buckle under the pressure to lower the standards. Rather, the state closely aligned their standards and tests to a detailed curriculum, thereby sending a clear signal to teachers about the content that would be covered on the tests. Their efforts elevated student performance in Massachusetts to unprecedented levels. North Carolina should replicate, as much as possible, this approach.

In North Carolina, mandating content is nothing new. State law already prescribes teaching of content in certain grades and course areas. For example, Chapter 115C-81: Basic Education Program prescribes inclusion of a civic literacy curriculum during American History I high school course (See Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Civic literacy mandates in NC General Statutes**

- (g) Civic Literacy. –
- (1) Local boards of education shall require during the high school years the teaching of a semester course “American History I - The Founding Principles,” to include at least the following:
    - a. The Creator-endowed inalienable rights of the people.
    - b. Structure of government, separation of powers with checks and balances.
    - c. Frequent and free elections in a representative government.
    - d. Rule of law.
    - e. Equal justice under the law.
    - f. Private property rights.
    - g. Federalism.
    - h. Due process.
    - i. Individual rights as set forth in the Bill of Rights.
    - j. Individual responsibility.

Health education, character education, and financial literacy are other content requirements outlined in the statute. The requirement to teach multiplication tables and cursive writing are two recent additions to the law.

If crafted carefully, the NCFA will ensure that the other parts of the instructional process – curriculum, instruction, and assessment – will not be undermined by whatever standards are used as a starting point. It is more than just a safeguard, however. A content-rich curriculum produces ancillary benefits as well. It provides a more equitable education environment, ensuring that all students, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances, are exposed to the same baseline content. In addition, the NCFA allows the state to compensate for the many deficiencies identified by institutions of higher education, private and public sector employers, and other stakeholders.

**Table 1: Elementary and secondary assessments**

Subject Area	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Reading	mCLASS, BOG, EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG
Math	EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG	EOG
Science	N/A	NC Final Exam	EOG	NC Final Exam	NC Final Exam	EOG
Social Studies	N/A	NC Final Exam	NC Final Exam	NC Final Exam	NC Final Exam	NC Final Exam
Multi-subject	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	EXPLORE

**Instruction: A district and teacher responsibility**

Curriculum content should not mandate that teachers adhere to a particular instructional method. Teachers would have the responsibility of using the commission developed standards and content as a starting point for teaching. The organization of the curriculum, which includes scope, sequence, pacing, and integration of the curriculum, would remain local decisions left to school administrators and teachers. Their ability to deliver content, as measured by standardized tests, would form the basis of annual evaluations. I suspect that evaluations performed under this system would be much more reliable than they are today.

**Assessments: Alternatives to state and Common Core testing**

The commission would also be charged with reviewing and recommending a testing program that complements their standards and curriculum plans.

According to the NC Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina has three testing options:

- Continue with the current assessments
- Participate in either of the two Common Core assessment consortia
- Implement a vendor-developed assessment

The “current assessments” refer to end-of-grade (EOG), end-of-course (EOC), and Final Exam tests developed by the NC Department of Public Instruction. NC students also take three tests developed by ACT, Inc. Eighth-grade students take EXPLORE, tenth-grade students take PLAN, and eleventh-grade students take the ACT<sup>17</sup> (See Tables 1 and 2).

Given that the commission would likely make substantial changes to state math and English standards, it makes little sense to adopt Common Core or state End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests that are aligned with the previous

**Table 2: High school assessments**

Subject Area	Grades 9-12	Grade 10	Grade 11
English I	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
English II	EOC	N/A	N/A
English III	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
English IV	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Math I	EOC	N/A	N/A
Math II	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Math III	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Pre-Calculus	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Discrete Math	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Biology	EOC	N/A	N/A
Earth/Environmental Science	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Physical Science	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Chemistry	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Physics	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
World History	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Civics and Economics	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
American History I	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
American History II	NC Final Exam	N/A	N/A
Multi-subject	N/A	PLAN	ACT

standards. Members of the commission should use this opportunity to get the NC Department of Public Instruction out of the testing business once and for all.

One of the main advantages to Common Core testing was that it produced state-by-state comparisons of student performance. To address this concern, the commission should adopt independent, field-tested, and credible national tests of student performance in math and English. There are a number of norm-referenced tests available for students in grades K-12, including the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Basic Achievement Skills Individual Screener (BASIS), Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT 8), and the Stanford Achievement Test Series, 10th Edition (Stanford 10). If members of the commission preferred a more customized or “hybrid” testing program, they could work with a testing company to develop the desired assessments.

## Conclusion

It is essential that the commission continue to exist after the completion of their initial work. The legislature should mandate yearly reviews of the standards, curriculum, and tests in other subjects. Feedback from teachers and administrators would be an essential component of these annual reviews. If the reformulated standards and curricula are creating difficulties in the classroom, the commission should have the authority to make minor adjustments to it without the approval of the NC State Board of Education.

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## End Notes

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