

April 23, 2013

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President

Michael J. Petrilli
Executive Vice President

Terrence R. Ryan
Vice President for
Ohio Programs & Policy

Amber M. Winkler
Vice President for Research

TRUSTEES

David P. Driscoll
Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Thomas A. Holton
Michael W. Kelly
Craig Kennedy
Rod Paige
David H. Ponitz
Caprice Young

TRUSTEES EMERITUS

Chester E. Finn (1918-2007)
Bruce Kovner
Bruno V. Manno
Diane Ravitch

1016 16th St NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20036
PHONE (202) 223-5452
FAX (202) 223-9226

2600 Far Hills Ave, Suite 216
Dayton, OH 45419
PHONE (937) 227-3368
FAX (937) 660-3338

37 W. Broad Street, Suite 400
Columbus, OH 43215
PHONE (614) 223-1580
FAX (614) 223-1494

Dear Legislator:

We are writing to urge you to stay the course with the Common Core State Standards.

We are, respectively, president and executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-of-center education-policy think tank. We promote sound education reforms with particular focus on school choice and standards-based reform. One of us (Finn) served in the Reagan Administration; the other (Petrilli) served in the George W. Bush Administration. Rod Paige is on our board—and Bill Bennett will be our speaker on Friday.

We understand that Alabama lawmakers are engaged in a lively debate about whether to stick with the Common Core, revert to your old reading and math standards, or forge a new path. This debate is more than appropriate; it's essential. Common Core started out as a state initiative, and these standards need the support of state leaders in order to be successful. (That's true of all academic standards. Many states struggle to get their standards right, then fall down on the job of implementing them.)

You may well already know that we think highly of the Common Core standards. We've been reviewing state standards in many subjects for fifteen years and have found most of them to be downright woeful. It's true that Alabama's have earned solid marks from our reviewers (except for science), yet many states with strong standards have decided to move to the Common Core, and for good reasons. As you consider your options, please consider these half-dozen (conservative) arguments for staying with the Common Core in Alabama:

1. **Fiscal responsibility.** You have already invested time and money into implementing the new standards. Calling for a do-over would waste the millions of man hours already invested—and potentially cost the state of Alabama more money than proceeding with the Common Core. And it would forego the economies of scale that will come from textbooks and other instructional materials that will be cheaper because they won't have to be customized for every state.
2. **Accountability.** The Common Core standards are pegged at a high level, which will bring a healthy dose of reality to the education reform

conversation. No longer will state tests show that three-quarters of Alabama students are “proficient” while the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows the number to be closer to one in four. The truth may be painful, but in the long run, it will serve your children, your educators, and your state economy far better. (We note, too, that the other day, your state board of education moved to use the ACT-Aspire assessments, which are aligned with the Common Core, as the state’s testing program.)

3. **School choice.** As strong supporters of parental choice, we are often asked how to reconcile our enthusiasm for the Common Core. Doesn’t it force a “one size fits all” approach on the schools? The short answer: No. Standards describe what students are expected to know and be able to do. Written correctly, they do not dictate any particular curriculum or pedagogy. Plus, the information that comes from standards-based testing gives parents a common yardstick with which to judge schools and make informed choices. (In any case, the Common Core deals only with the two core subjects of English and math.)
4. **Competitiveness.** While the United States dithers, other countries are eating our lunch. If we don’t want to cede the 21st Century to our economic and political rivals—China especially—we need to expect many more young Americans to emerge from high school truly ready for college and career. No, that doesn’t mean that everyone needs to go to a four-year liberal arts college. But as Lamar Alexander used to say when governor of Tennessee, “Better schools mean better jobs.” Common Core takes us a long way there. (And Alabamians will have a far clearer sense of how their kids and their schools stack up against those of other countries—and other states—because it will be far easier to compare performance against the Common Core standards.)
5. **Innovation.** The Common Core standards are encouraging a huge amount of investment from states, private foundations, and private companies, which has produced Common Core-aligned textbooks, e-books, professional development, online learning, and more. Online learning, especially, is going to open up a world of choices for students and families, and it is going to be aligned to the Common Core, not to individual state standards.
6. **Traditional education values.** The Common Core standards are worth supporting because they’re educationally solid. They are rigorous, they are traditional—one might even say they are “conservative.” They expect students to know their math facts, to read the nation’s founding documents, and to evaluate evidence and come to independent judgments. In all of these ways, they are miles better than three-quarters of the state standards they replaced—standards that hardly deserve the name and that often pushed the left-wing drivel that Common Core critics say they abhor. This is why E.D. Hirsch,

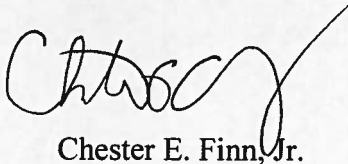
Jr., the author of *Cultural Literacy* and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, supports the Common Core.

We know that the Common Core issue has heated up. We understand that many conservatives are justifiable angry about the inappropriate role the Obama Administration has played in promoting and taking credit for these standards, which in fact arose from *state* leadership.

Still, we see Common Core as a great *conservative* victory. The standards were developed by the states. They are solid and traditional. They don't give into moral relativism, blame-America-first, or so many other liberal nostrums that have infected our public schools.

And at the end of the day, they are voluntary. You can choose to go your own way. That's as it should be. We just hope you'll choose to stay the course.

Sincerely,



Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President



Michael J. Petrilli
Executive Vice President