



PO Box 1327 • Madison WI 53701-1327
608-268-5074 (Madison) • 866-849-2536 (toll-free) • 608-256-3370 (fax)
Email: info@wifamilyaction.org
Web site: www.wifamilyaction.org
Blog: <http://blog.wifamilyaction.com>

**Testimony Regarding Common Core State Standards as Adopted by
State of Wisconsin, Department of Public Instruction
Select Committee for Review of the Common Core Standards Initiative
Julaine K. Appling, WFA President
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Thank you, Senator Farrow and Representative Thiesfeldt, and all committee members, for holding this series of hearings to allow the people of this state to assist you in the very important work of assessing the educational standards that have been recently adopted by Tony Evers in his capacity as State Superintendent of Public Instruction as well as the process by which these standards were adopted and implementation plans developed.

I speak today primarily as president of Wisconsin Family Action, a statewide organization that champions Wisconsin's best natural resource—her families. We believe that fundamentally education of the next generation is the responsibility of parents. In order for parents to fulfill that responsibility, it is critical that they are fully informed and very involved with what their children are expected to learn in school, how they are performing, and how they are being assessed. Our testimony reflects these beliefs.

I am also by training and experience an educator. I have undergraduate and graduate degrees in education, classroom experience from junior-high through college, as well as administrative experience in a K-6 private school. Curriculum and instruction are areas where I have considerable interest and expertise. In addition, from 2000-2005 I served on the Watertown Unified School District Board of Education and was on the Curriculum and Instruction Committee for the duration of my tenure. My background and experience, including my current position, give me a solid foundation and something of a unique perspective from which to assess the Common Core State Standards.

Developing educational standards, properly done, requires a great deal of time and expertise, not to mention developing the related testing to ensure standards are met. This is especially true when we are talking about state standards that attempt to lay a foundation for what students statewide should be able to do when they complete grades and educational programs.

Wisconsin's former standards were inadequate. I doubt many would argue otherwise. The goal of revising the standards was and is worthy. We rightly take pride in our schools and our teachers and want an excellent education for our children and expect them to perform well when measured against the rest of the county and against international programs.

I would be remiss if I did not remind you that educational standards do not ensure learning or student success. Time and again we have seen that quality, committed teachers are the real difference-makers. They can take ridiculous standards and poor textbooks and ancillary curricula materials and still turn out students who have mastered grade-level concepts—and much, much more. That is not to say standards are not important; but it is imperative we keep standards in proper perspective. They are, or certainly should be, minimums, not maximums—learning “floors,” not “ceilings.”

Too often in attempts to improve upon the standards already being employed in our public education system, we fail to sufficiently subject these standards, as well as implementation methods and systems and assessment tools, to the scrutiny they inherently deserve. In our rush to provide our children with the “next best thing,” we can at times miss our intended target and create for ourselves additional, albeit unintended, new problems.

And so it is with Wisconsin’s adoption of Common Core State Standards.

A national initiative to implement new educational benchmarks for each individual grade level, Common Core State Standards were adopted in Wisconsin as a way of addressing a very real need here in our state: the updating of Wisconsin’s dated and some would say overly broad educational standards that have been in place for some time now.

We agree conceptually with the need to have rigorous, robust standards that are challenging to our students and prepare them for the future. We also believe that standards, from time to time, need to be reviewed and appropriately updated and improved. So in that regard, we don’t fault those who have set out to accomplish this.

What we do question, however, is whether the solution that has been adopted, the Common Core State Standards, was the best solution for our state and for our children. We question whether due diligence was really done in looking at all possible avenues for improvement, or if Common Core State Standards were adopted in large part simply because they were the first readily available solution to a real problem that needed attention. Putting together committees to review standards that are already created, tasked with making a recommendation regarding adoption, is far different from putting together committees tasked with creating the standards.

Common Core State Standards were well funded, slickly marketed, and presented as a comparatively easy fix to a complex issue here in our state and around the country. We overlooked and under-utilized the valuable and capable people we have right here in our own state, choosing instead to take the far easier path of adopting standards that are decidedly “one-size-fits-all” determined by people whose primary interest is not Wisconsin’s children. Thus, wittingly or unwittingly, we yielded to the federal level even more local control of our educational programs.

We have some very real concerns with the standards we are implementing. We have concerns over the security of our children’s personal information; concerns over a perceived lack of local control over what our children are being taught and how they are being tested; questions regarding oversight; and questions regarding the rigor of the standards that have been adopted. I am sure that all of these concerns will be well represented here today, so I will refrain from going into any more depth and move on to what I think is the most important question of the day: Where do we go from here? What do we do now?

We believe there are several things that can be done legislatively to address some of the broader concerns that have been revealed through the recent discussions on this matter and also address the deficiencies of the currently adopted program. These recommendations are not to be interpreted as “ways to make Common Core State Standards better,” but rather, as ways to mitigate some of the problems inherent in establishing educational standards for a state, whether they are Common Core State Standards or standards designed by Wisconsin educators specifically for Wisconsin students.

- 1) **“Firewalls” to Protect Personal Information** The first firewall needs to be at the district level protecting all specific information relating to our children, their families, their health, and their testing scores. Only minimal, randomized, or aggregate information is to be passed through to DPI for the sake of school performance evaluations. The second firewall needs to be at DPI to prevent the transfer of information from the department through to the federal government or any other outside entity. These need to be legislatively clarified and enforced.

- 2) **Reaffirm and Clarify Local Autonomy Over Curriculum** Districts need to be expressly responsible for the curriculums used in their schools. Curriculum content should be vetted and determined locally, as should be the addressing of parental concerns over curriculum substance or content. Current law provides for this but this needs to be reiterated when it comes to state educational standards. Standards and curriculum are not the same thing. And much of the problem many have with Common Core State Standards is actually because textbook publishers and curriculum producers are taking extreme liberty to indoctrinate students with liberal, un-American, anti-American teaching that promotes values that are at cross-purposes with many of our communities. These curricular decisions are rightly made at the school board level.
- 3) **Clarify Rights of Parental Access** Textbooks, and all supplemental curricular educational materials, used by teachers must be made available to parents at their request. Parents should have access to their child's classroom, by and large, whenever requested. Again, ultimately parents are responsible for the education of their children, not the state.
- 4) **Establish State Level Accountability for the Substance of all Standardized Tests** Educational standards themselves can be expected to continually evolve. Therefore, we need to definitively establish clear cut responsibility and accountability for the substance of any testing assessing whether or not students have met the standards. Because a Wisconsin-based, Wisconsin-developed alternative set of educational standards may very well end up being the preferred option for the future, we must have the capability of creating and administering standardized tests at the state level. Right now, people upset with the standards and/or testing have no way to effectively express their concerns because no one in the state really has ownership of the Common Core State Standards developed by and funded by national groups. DPI should be the responsible party for both the creation of and content of standardized tests.
- 5) **Establish a Permanent Means To Review Educational Standards and Testing** Existing standards should continually be reviewed and improved. This review should be ongoing and systematic and should ultimately result in the creation of Wisconsin-based standards that set the bar sufficiently high to ensure our students are truly "college and career ready." We believe the Common Core State Standards too often set the bar too low. Students rise to expectations; standards need to expect more of students, not settle for the minimum. We believe we truly can do better. However, any standards must be regularly reviewed.
- 6) **Prevent Any Implementation of Common Core State Standards beyond Math and English and Establish a Sunset/Replacement Clause on Common Core in General** Wisconsin has committed to adopting an unproven set of academic standards and in hindsight should have looked internally for a Wisconsin-based solution to our education needs. DPI should be tasked to work, in a transparent manner, on the creation of educational standards that are truly rigorous and represent the proud educational heritage that we have here in the Badger State. These Wisconsin-based standards should be ready for implementation in conjunction with the above-stated sunset of the Common Core State Standards currently adopted.

We trust the legislature will look closely at these recommendations. This problem is not going away. Taking appropriate action now will show concerned citizens and parents that you truly want our children to receive the very best education possible while maintaining Wisconsin's proud tradition of local control of our educational programs and institutions. Thank you for your time.