

**Testimony to Governor Cuomo's Common Core Task Force
Submitted by Angela Stockman, WNY Education Associates
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Genesee Community College**

My name is Angela Stockman, and I've been a New York State educator for 23 years. I began my career teaching English Language Arts at the elementary and middle school levels for the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, continued teaching English at the middle and high school levels in the former Mayville Central School District, and spent the bulk of my career—ten years—teaching middle level English in Amherst Central School District. During this time, I was tapped to share my experiences as a teacher of writing who supported inclusion students in a co-teaching model. This is how I came to be a coordinator on the Instructional Resources Team at Erie 1 BOCES. Here, I designed and facilitated professional learning experiences for teachers and administrators in close to thirty local school districts. For the last eight years, I've continued to support ten districts independently. This afforded me the opportunity to provide sustained, job-embedded support to teachers through multi-year literacy initiatives. I was a Network Equivalent Team leader in Lockport City School District, and I've served as an instructional coach K-12 classrooms throughout our region, piloting teacher-designed curricula as well as variety of programs, including many of the New York State English Language Arts curriculum domains and modules.

I do not work for or represent any vendor or corporation, nor am I paid by any agency to share my perspectives about the Common Core or the Regents Reform Agenda. I'm invited to often though, largely because my experiences are varied, and my sustained work with multiple districts provides a vantage point that many do not have.

For this reason, I am uncomfortable with the single stories that listening sessions like these invite. We all know that it is dangerous to generalize and yet, it's very easy to do so when a small group of people come together to share their narrow but very passionate perspectives. The Common Core is what a community makes of it. To that end, I invited the teachers and administrators I support to provide their perspective on the English Language Arts standards. You'll find a summary of that data below. My personal perspectives will follow, and I will be careful to distinguish them as such. This is my attempt to invite more voices into this room, and this is important, as the notice for this event was very short and the time and location are less than ideal for most teachers and administrators.

I invited the educators that I support to respond to the following question:

To what degree do you agree with the following statement: The Common Core Learning Standards have made my students better readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.

- 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- 100% of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement shared significant concerns, including detailed anecdotes, about the influence of standardized testing on students (particularly special education students), local decisions to mandate the use of the curriculum modules and domains, and limited attention to writing.

- Most (but not all) of the respondents who disagreed with the statement above were unable to distinguish the Common Core Standards themselves from standardized testing, the curriculum modules and domains, and teacher evaluation. Most who spoke to the modules implied that they were a mandated requirement of adopting the Core as well.
- Finally, 68% of all responders stated that their curricula is fully aligned to the Core, and they have begun the process of studying its impact on performance. In our work, performance is not defined as performance on a state test but instead, performance in the classroom during learning experiences and on local formative and summative assessments. During my live testimony, Randi Weingarten asked me to clarify whether the teachers I serve would be interested in the use of measures other than standardized testing to study learning and growth at the state level. I stated that this was absolutely the case.

Those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement above shared the following anecdotes about the positive influence of the Core:

“I feel the standards have brought attention and focus back to why we focus on learning targets in the classroom. That has aided in providing structure not only for the teacher, but for the students as well.”

“The standards have had a fairly positive influence in my classroom. I have pushed students more than I have in the past, and some have risen to the challenge.”

“My students are learning smarter.”

“Holding students to higher standards has been good. They can do it, but it takes time.”

“My special needs students were afraid to write before. They show increased confidence and much greater skill now.”

“My students have become ELA detectives in my class. We infer constantly and work hard to find evidence when we make claims.”

“When they collect evidence, it builds their confidence. Many are much more willing to participate now.”

“I’ve allowed myself to return to what was important many years ago—deep analysis of text. This informs writing and student development too.”

“I love the math standards and believe the modules attend to them well.”

“Students are really becoming deep thinkers. This is an ongoing process.”

"The standards are rigorous and thorough. I have no specific concerns."

"The standards are excellent guidelines for instruction."

"We are now in the fifth year of implementation, and there is no denying that the majority of my students' skills are improving."

"Students are reading and loving much more nonfiction."

"It's easier to integrate social studies and science and finally make time for that with these standards."

"They are definitely better readers."

"The standards give teachers and students ownership of the curriculum, as long as they are not mandated to adopt modules and follow them like a script."

"Students are looking at texts from different viewpoints. They are becoming critical thinkers rather than assuming they have answers."

"My students are far better off today than they were five years ago."

"The standards are a great aspiration, and we need to shoot for them. We can't assume they aren't developmentally appropriate because kids aren't all reaching mastery."

"We have evidence of student learning gaps decreasing at a far greater rate than in the past."

"People now seem to believe that the modules are what students need to know NOT that the standards are what they need to know. That's the problem. Changing the standards does nothing to change the context in which the standards are taught and measured. These people are focusing on the wrong problem."

Three respondents who agreed with the statement above also shared these concerns:

"The assessments cannot measure close reading with any level of integrity. Students need to read and reread. They would run out of time."

"I can't be as creative as I'd like to be. I have to stick to a pretty rigid schedule. Fun things are disappearing."

“The work by Network Team members seems to have gone unnoticed by the policy-makers including the Board of Regents, legislature, and the governor. NYSED is repeatedly blamed for poor implementation; however, under Commissioner King—many attempts were made to connect with K-12 educators in ELA, Math, SS, and Science. Professional Development offered at the state level was facilitated through BOCES, who were liasons for school districts. If school leaders did not take advantage of it and if teachers didn’t, NYSED should not be blamed. The CCLS are solid standards K-12. They describe what students should know and be able to do. For four years, countless hours have been spent helping educators learn, apply, and improve their craft with the CCLS. To change the standards now would lead to many more problems versus solutions.”

“The CCLS was a great shift. If only it were rolled out properly.”

Respondents who disagreed with the statement above shared these anecdotes, which speak to their concerns:

“I have seen some students become discouraged and overwhelmed.”

“Students don’t have books in their hands. They have to listen [if the teacher is using a module at the primary level].”

“People tend to be focused on the curriculum and the NYS Assessments and not on the standards themselves. Thus, I think the standards are the target of the general population of grievances when really the standards are actually pretty good. The roll out of the standards with APPR and the poorly designed NYS Assessments lumps the standards with poor company.”

“I am having difficulty reconciling grade level standards to IEP goals and objectives. Many students are performing well below grade level, and our report cards are now standards based by grade level so often times, I’m not even addressing grade level standards for low performing students.”

“Writing is very weak in the modules (mentioned by three different respondents).”

“Writing is frustrating for some, and so are decoding and word attack skills.”

“They are not better writers, because there is no time for creative writing.”

“We don’t need to adjust the standards, but we need to adjust messaging around them.”

“It’s all about the test and meeting mandates fast.”

"We need more structured and unstructured writing in the modules."

"The burden of state testing has given the CCLS a negative reputation."

"We have too many assessments."

"The assessments are not even aligned to the CCLS. They aren't developmentally appropriate."

"Special consideration must be given for self-contained and even CT special education students. Our students are asked to take tests based on standards that are far above they grade level they are performing at."

"More emphasis needed on writing mechanics and grammar."

"Professionals (not companies) need to determine what is developmentally appropriate and adjust for this."

"Module topics need to be more relevant to kids."

"I am not against the standards, but the task force must be dedicated to addressing the needs of SPED students."

What follows are my personal recommendations to the task force, based solely on my experiences. I was a Network Equivalent Team member for Lockport City School District. I've also facilitated multi-year, job-embedded professional learning experiences relevant to curriculum design, shifting instructional practices, and assessment design with the Common Core. My work took place in ten districts through two different BOCES with an audience of approximately 1000 teachers:

1. Mr. Cuomo must work in partnership with the New York State Department of Education and defer to the experts and the research-based practitioners that lead our field.

It's my overwhelming opinion that the Common Core Learning Standards have been undermined by those who sought to achieve complex goals in a very short time frame without any awareness of systems thinking or how change is best facilitated. Furthermore, Governor Cuomo's arrogant and reckless manipulation of our education system has likely set true progress in our field back a decade or more. As an educator who has facilitated standards alignment with dozens of districts since 2004, it's my opinion that the Common Core is an elegant and coherent set of standards that support engaged learning, teacher and student choice, and even the elimination of grades and other archaic and arbitrary structures.

They have to be placed in the right hands, though. Rather than readying our hands, our Governor tied them by issuing mandate after senseless mandate and then pointing his own very powerful fingers at the

New York State Department of Education when disaster ensued, refusing to accept ownership of the very significant role he had in creating it.

It was Governor Cuomo who forced NYSED's hand in the rushed implementation of these standards from the outset, disregarding those who warned that such an approach would ignite mass hysteria and faulty implementation.

It was Governor Cuomo who mandated that standardized tests carry the greatest weight in our teacher evaluation system as well, despite the fact that these tests had not yet been developed, let alone deemed reliable or valid. From the outset of this reform effort, Mr. Cuomo disregarded those who favored a true 60/20/20 model and in fact threatened to deny aid to districts unless they got on board with his policies. This made a mockery of the use of assessment and data in our field and all but destroyed the progress of pioneering experts: educators, educational experts, and psychometricians.

It is unacceptable for Governor Cuomo to deny his history while launching continued attacks against the New York State Department of Education, teachers, and administrators. He is manipulating New Yorkers with policies that violate best practices in an attempt to pacify angry voters.

2. Protect the Common Core Learning Standards.

As we are now in our fifth year of implementation, I am not acquainted with a single teacher or administrator who opposes the Common Core Learning Standards specifically. In fact, when I've asked teachers to define their own standards at the outset of each Common Core Learning Standards initiative, the standards they articulate are nearly identical to the Core. It is my understanding that states who have overthrown the Core have witnessed similar phenomena when they've brought teachers together to design their own standards as well. The Core speaks to what matters most. Furthermore, as we are now in the fifth year of implementation, the teachers that I work with will tell you that they not only know the standards well, they teach with them consistently, and they are measuring student learning in relation to them. It isn't the standards that teachers struggle with, and they don't want them undone.

3. Rectify the testing mess and uncouple teacher evaluation and standardized test scores.

The quality and amount of required standardized testing isn't just hurting our kids. It's damaging our profession as well. This reform agenda has corrupted our understanding of assessment, our definitions of quality test design, and the protocols we use for making meaning from the data produced. I support the use of high quality standardized testing, but I feel we must balance practices that are good for adults with practices that are good for children. I cannot abide by testing systems that overwhelm learners and compromise other joyful learning experiences, regardless of how meaningful the data they produce may be. I can appreciate the fact that high quality standardized assessment systems work to limit the influence of local bias. We can't sacrifice learning or the physical and mental health of our children or our teachers and administrators in order to achieve this though.

4. Provide districts necessary resources for teaching with the Core in healthy, engaging, and empowering ways. Teachers must have confidence in their power to adopt or adapt programs or design their own curricula. They must be coached to pilot their curricula as well, to document evidence of student learning, and to make adjustments in response to the needs that emerge. Many educators have been victimized by

a compliance mindset that is driven by fear. Many will tell you that the New York State Curriculum modules and domains are required, that they must follow them as scripts, and that they face consequences when they drift. This cannot be the spirit or the intent of any high quality curriculum initiative. It certainly wasn't the intention of the designers or the New York State Department of Education. It's my opinion that such decisions were local ones and that any administrator who mandates rigid alignment to any curricula does so in response to high levels of fear perpetuated by the influence of testing on professional evaluations and the reputation of the school district.

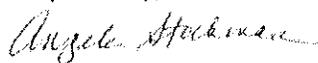
5. Start including professional learning service providers from all walks of life (including independent consultants) at the training table, and begin holding all of them far more accountable for their work. For far too many, NTI trainings have become little more than an opportunity for staff developers to network and party. Critical messages, resources, and practices aren't finding their way back to local districts, and often, when teachers are receiving information, it is grossly distorted. I've served as the lead professional learning service provider for Common Core English Language Arts in upwards of ten different school districts. I've also supported two BOCES to a lesser degree. My fingerprint is on the work of thousands of teachers at this point, and it is likely impacting many more students and their performance. Why are service providers like me not being evaluated, as teachers and administrators are?

6. Lead the movement toward standards based grading. The Common Core Learning Standards are rich, rigorous, and complex standards. It is unlikely that most learners will master them during the first quarter or trimester of a school year, and yet, many districts continue to use antiquated reporting systems that communicate just the opposite to parents and children. We must support learning and growth rather than testing and performance—especially at the local level. The movement to standards based grading would facilitate this shift. It has the potential to change how educators, parents, and students perceive, implement, and assess progress with the Core.

7. Deepen assessment and data literacy at the local level. Teachers are yearning for increased control over assessment design and data collection and yet, the field provides little to no support in order to build this capacity. Both are grounded in significant research, and while many have been led to believe that they are experts in assessment design and the use of data, the fact is that most teachers and professional learning service providers do not possess this expertise. In order for educators to play a greater role in the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment quality, many more of them must be properly trained. Furthermore, when leaders work to identify experts to lead such work, they must reach out and retain the services of those who are proven leaders in the field. I'm uncertain if the current protocol for requesting and responding to proposals is effective.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my findings and my personal recommendations with you and look forward to the learning more about the work of the task force and its influence on New York students and educators. I can be reached at the email address and phone number below should you have further inquiries.

Respectfully,



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