



August 3, 2010

Dear Dr. Bennett:

It is long past time to acknowledge that despite our energetic best efforts, we have failed for decades to improve the unacceptable state of literacy among our children. This failure is chronic, and threatens to become both a symbol and root cause of America's decline. If we view NAEP scores of our 17-year-olds as the final report card on the finished products of our K-12 education we cannot be other than ashamed. From the first NAEP report in 1971 to today, a span of years longer than most of us have labored in education, there has been no change in the scores. Forty years and hundreds of billions of public dollars spent on public education, and we have made no measurable progress whatsoever in improving the ability of America's 17 year olds to comprehend written text, a skill that predicts a young person's economic and civic effectiveness.

To arrest the decline, the time has come to set aside established orthodoxies, be receptive to ideas that may challenge our assumptions, and be bold in setting ourselves on a new and different path. It is my belief that the English Language Arts Standards created by the National Governors Association Center and the Council of Chief State School Officers can provide such a path.

To date 34 states have moved to adopt the standards. Thoughtful critics, whose opinions I regard highly, complain that they lack specificity. Some, in states with exemplary standards, have expressed concern that the Common Core Standards represent a step backward. As someone who has spent decades arguing for greater specificity and commonality, I do not dismiss these criticisms. Why then do I support these standards? It is easy to find fault in particulars, but these can be easily corrected in creating a real curriculum out of the standards. I support them because more than merely unifying the current patchwork of expectations among the states the Common Core Standards represent new approaches to language arts based on the deepest results of research in cognitive science. The new standards recognize that verbal achievement is based on general knowledge, and that instruction in language arts must cover all key academic domains, and be integrated with a content-rich curriculum.

By repeatedly emphasizing the critical fact that language mastery also requires knowledge of history, art, music, and science—and moreover that these subjects should be included in the class time devoted to literacy—these standards go beyond the narrow literary emphasis of even the best of the existing state standards. They also stand as a powerful corrective action to the curriculum narrowing that has been the unhappy result of the well-intentioned move to hold schools accountable for student achievement.

If this simple, powerful idea takes root—if the Common Core State Standards transform the elementary school "literacy block" into a rich, meaningful and sustained engagement with subject matter—it would be the single greatest transformation of instructional time in American education in decades. It is an indispensable conceptual breakthrough and an opportunity we must not squander.

The draft standards leave curriculum decisions to the states, but the message is clear: there must be a curriculum. And it must be coherent, specific and content-rich. I am grateful to the authors of the Common Core State Standards for seeing what so many others have missed. And I urge you to help Indiana speed their adoption.

Sincerely,