

Delia DeCourcy
2046 Yorkshire Road
Birmingham, MI 48009
delia.decourcy@oakland.k12.mi.us

August 27, 2013

Chairman Walker, Chairman Pavlov, Members of the Senate Education Committee, and the Senate K-12 Appropriations Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the Common Core Standards. I am a literacy consultant for Oakland Schools, an ISD serving the 28 school districts in Oakland County. In this role, I design professional development opportunities for English teachers and support schools in the effective teaching and assessment of reading and writing. I previously taught middle and high school English for nine years. Prior to becoming a literacy consultant, I taught first-year writing at the University of Michigan and acted as a consultant in the university's writing center, conferencing with undergraduates about their papers for courses across the disciplines.

During my four years at U of M, I read hundreds of essays by college students. And I, and my writing center colleagues, noticed a worrisome trend. A significant number of first-year students struggled to think critically about texts and to articulate strong arguments in well-written prose. Not only was I surprised by my students' lack of preparation for college-level work but so were my students. Many of them had taken honors English in high school and gotten A's, seemingly indicating that they were ready for the challenges of college writing. But they weren't. I assumed the same scenario was playing out at institutions of higher education across the state, which was troubling.

In 2010, during my third year teaching at the University of Michigan, I was approached by Oakland Schools to write Common Core-aligned curriculum for the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) Common Core Initiative. The MAISA English language arts units would be free to all schools in Michigan and be aligned across grades K-12 to ensure students' skills development as they progressed through the grades.

Given my concerns about student writing preparation, I was interested. I spent a summer studying the Common Core Standards and was impressed with the skill progression from grades K to 12 and the focus on argument, expository writing, and research. I became excited about the standards' potential to improve students' reading, writing, thinking, and speaking. And this belief was bolstered by the fact that the National Council for the Teachers of English had provided thorough feedback on each of the three drafts of the Common Core, directly affecting the document's evolution, language, and clarity.

The further I got into writing nine curricular units for the MAISA Common Core Initiative, the more I believed in the quality of the standards and what they could do for student learning. And as 350 teachers across Oakland County piloted more than 100 MAISA Common Core-aligned units over the last two years, we witnessed that potential. Trends piloting teachers reported include:

- A shift to a student-centered classroom resulting in deeper student engagement with texts and writing.
- Student excitement about reading and writing.
- Students producing more complex writing pieces because in these units, they have to “dig deep and think hard.”
- Teachers’ better understanding of the new standards compared to the previous standards (GLCE’s), which were confusing and provided little structure for a curricular progression.
- The CCSS helping teachers think across a year and multiple grades about developing student skills rather than teaching a skill in isolation.
- An opportunity for schools across a district to be aligned in the skills they teach.
- Teachers’ renewed interest in teaching because the units challenge and invigorate them.

Let me be clear—the MAISA units are not a state-mandated curriculum. They are model units of study that illustrate for teachers how to teach to the Common Core in ways that deeply engage students and improve outcomes. Units must be adapted to particular contexts and student populations, empowering teachers to do what is best for their students.

The Common Core Standards represent an important shift away from English language arts teachers being teachers of literature and towards them being teachers of literacy. What does this mean? The focus in English classrooms is on how to read deeply and how to write effectively rather than simply making sure students read certain books and can name literary elements. While the Common Core prioritizes the reading of fiction in English classes, it also demands thoughtful engagement with non-fiction texts and that students can write more than a literary analysis. They must be able to develop thoughtful arguments and pen informational texts, writing tasks we know they will face when they enter college and the labor force.

After the release of the final draft of the CCSS, Kathryn Au, then president of the International Reading Association said, “While a good start has been made, we know from over two decades of work with standards that this first component is the easiest of the three to put in place. The heavy lifting comes when we address the other two components: assessment and professional development.”

In Michigan, educators thought that first component—adopting solid college and career ready standards—was well behind them. We have already begun the heavy lifting work—the professional development—in anticipation of the coming assessments. Why stop this work in midstream when it is hugely benefitting

students and reinvigorating teachers about their profession? I urge you to do what is right for students and fund the continued implementation of the Common Core Standards in Michigan.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Delia DeCourcy
Oakland Schools Literacy Consultant