

# Education Policy News

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## Special Points of Interest:

- In April 2009, the Office for Education Policy hosted its 2nd annual conference in Little Rock.
- The 2008 theme was “Adequacy Achieved...Now What?”
- The 2010 theme will be school leadership.

## PREPARING HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS FOR ARKANSAS

In April 2009, the Office for Education Policy hosted a conference in Little Rock titled “Preparing Highly Qualified Teachers for Arkansas,” which focused on the state of teacher quality in Arkansas.

The conference consisted of three sessions and a keynote address by Senator Joyce Elliott. The sessions contained several presentations from a variety of speakers who discussed traditional standards, assessments, and teacher preparation; the effectiveness of alternative routes to teaching; and useful indices of teacher effectiveness.

Because of the interest in the

conference and the importance of the topic, we have decided to focus this newsletter on teacher quality. We have asked a few of the speakers to submit articles that you will read in this newsletter, to summarize what they discussed at the conference.

Each speaker’s presentation and a video of Senator Elliott’s address can be found on the OEP website by visiting:

[http://uark.edu/ua/oep/2009\\_Conference\\_Proceedings.html](http://uark.edu/ua/oep/2009_Conference_Proceedings.html)

We hope you enjoy reading the views of our guest authors in this issue!

*“We will do something about teacher quality when we  
want teacher quality as much as we want the next  
NCAA championship in football.”*

*- Senator Joyce Elliott*

## SESSION 1: STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS, AND TEACHER PREPARATION IN ARKANSAS

The first session focused on traditional standards, assessments, and teacher preparation. Two of the presenters have submitted a summary of their presentation, which includes their recommendations for improving standards on the following pages.

The other presentations were: Charles Watson (Arkansas Department of Education) addressed “Teaching Algebra 1 at Grade 8” and Margie Gillis (Haskins Laboratory, Yale University) highlighted her “Rationale for a Dedicated Reading Test.”

## DOES ARKANSAS HAVE THE SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS THAT IT NEEDS?

### *McComas' Key Science Recommendations:*

- ⇒ There should be fewer learning goals (less material) at each grade level
- ⇒ The Frameworks should include outcomes and specific recommendations for instruction
- ⇒ Content should connect better across grades, especially at the elementary level
- ⇒ Consider regional or national science guidelines

*By William McComas*

As a new member of the science education community in Arkansas, I am pleased to have had the opportunity to review the current Framework for science instruction in detail and in comparison with similar documents from other states. As part of this review process, I contacted teachers across Arkansas and asked them to reflect on our Framework. Since these teachers are responsible for putting the Frameworks into practice, their opinions are far more important than mine. But there was a surprising degree of overlap in views.

The first issue that struck me is the fact that the Arkansas document is called a Framework and not a set of Standards, even though it is comprised of many large scale standards and associated instructional goals. Not much is to be gained by arguing over a name, but generally framework documents are those containing both specific instructional standards and recommendations regarding how to teach. In reviewing the Arkansas Science Framework the only major instructional imperative is that of inquiry which is to occupy 20% of classroom time, but more about this issue later.

I agree with the science teachers who state that the Arkansas Science Frameworks attempt to cover too much material. It would be hard to imagine that our science teachers can cover as many as 105 goals in physics, 110 in chemistry, and more than 90 in

physical science, biology, and anatomy/physiology. One teacher stated, *"There is too much emphasis on goals and getting through the material; no time to immerse the student into a subject that intrigues them."* Another said, *"Our curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep. Even in the lower grades we have gone to an "integrated" science which emphasizes this shallowness rather than reinforcing specific concepts."* Another said that the biology curriculum requires that *"students compare and contrast the major invertebrate classes to their nervous, respiratory, excretory, circulatory, and digestive systems . . . this is a semester-long course in invertebrate zoology."*

The nature of the learning goals themselves could be improved such that they are more orientated toward their assessment. For instance P.7.PS.6 is *"Define light in terms of waves and particles."* A more engaging goal would be, *"Describe the properties of light (such as transmission, intensity, etc) as if it were composed of particles and as if it were wave-like. What evidence exists to support each model?"*

It is clear that we need a stronger spiral curriculum that re-visits the same topic from year to year, taking students to higher levels of abstraction (not just repeating content). The Arkansas Science Frameworks does some of this (particularly in the nature of science in the upper grades) but many of the learning goals seem like "factoid" pieces of the bigger picture, rather than a deliberate scaffolding of content. There is a large gap in connectivity between grades K-4 and 5-8.

The Framework for the lower grade levels are particularly problematic. The Frameworks require every science, every year (K-8), but it is doubtful that students will see the connections within a specific scientific discipline from grade to grade. The idea of including each science in each elementary grade is likely a source of confusion for students and frustration for teachers. For instance, in third grade teachers are expected to cover measurement, conducting an experiment, lab safety, vertebrates and invertebrates, metamorphosis,

properties of matter, mass, amplitude and frequency, sound, light, temperature, energy production, magnets, rocks and minerals, earth's layers, precipitation, measuring rainfall, planets, day/night cycles and – finally – respiration and muscle systems. Yet, the skeleton is discussed in Grade 2 while digestion and circulation are included at Grade 4. No rationale is provided for this buffet approach to the teaching of elementary science. The fear is that students will see science delivered this way as a “bunch of facts.” A middle level teacher commented on the situation by saying, *“Being a middle-level educator, I am stressed because the elementary grade teachers often don't cover the material for their grade levels, so I spend a great deal of time building knowledge before I can teach the concepts at my level.”*

One of the most frustrating elements of the Arkansas Science Frameworks is the focus on the use of hands-on/inquiry instruction. Such a focus is laudable given the focus on inquiry in the National Science Education Standards, but many teachers commented that there is simply *“not enough time for hands-on experiments or science exploration.”* This echoed the view of many; there are so many individual learning goals that no time exists to engage science at the level of inquiry.

In spite of these concerns, the current Arkansas Science Frameworks are generally good (particularly when compared with those of other states). But our next document should be a true framework, specifying both outcomes for instruction (standards

or goals) and explicit recommendations for instruction (such as inquiry). There should be far fewer learning goals at almost every grade level, thus permitting teachers to provide students the hands-on experiences, and there should be a better version of science articulation across the elementary grades. Every science, every year is both impractical to deliver and generally ill advised. The purpose of elementary science in view of many is to encourage exploration and enhance interest in science, not to amass as many facts as possible only to encounter them again in the upper grades.

The boldest recommendation I could offer is for educational leaders in Arkansas to consider the question of whether we need our own unique science instructional standards. Nature operates in identical fashion throughout the universe so there is nothing special about science in Arkansas, and we must recognize that we are preparing our students for science success nationally. Both of these facts should encourage a view against unique state standards. A more visionary response to the need for standards would be for us to take the lead in forming a regional or national consortium of states to craft a single strong set of instructional guidelines. Who knows, we might become known as the home of the Arkansas Science Document just as Iowa is recognized for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills!

*Dr. William McComas is the Parks Family Professor of Science Education at the College of Education and Health Professions, University of Arkansas.*

## TEACHING AND ‘THE TEST’: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE STATE ASSESSMENTS IN LITERACY AND TEACHER PREPARATION AND PRACTICE

*By Christian Goering and David Jolliffe*

As literacy educators, we are concerned both about pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions of the Arkansas grade 11 literacy examination and the ACTAAP Benchmark literacy exams, and the merits of these tests. Using a questionnaire, we asked pre-service teachers to describe their perceptions of how the Grade 11 literacy or the ACTAAP Benchmark

test affected teaching and learning during their field placements, and to characterize their mentors' perceptions of how the exams influenced their teaching. Two issues stood out:

1) An estimated 56 percent of instructional time is being spent preparing for the grade 11 and Benchmark testing. 2) Perceptions of these tests were overwhelmingly negative and critical.

There is also the issue of the test itself and the question of whether the current grade 11 literacy exam helps students attain admission to and succeed in college. Since Arkansas students must take the ACT to attain admission to college, and the ACT is geared towards identifying students who will be successful, the current grade 11 literacy exam could be counterproductive.

Our issues with the test are demonstrated in a study of the multiple choice questions used to measure reading on standardized tests; two types of questions are identified: 1) Reproduction-of-knowledge—the answer is given somewhere in the passage; and 2) Construction-of-knowledge—the student must infer, interpret, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information. The ACT reading section contains considerably more construction-of-knowledge questions than the most recently released grade 11 literacy exam. This disparity concerns us: If the state exam puts such an emphasis on reproducing knowledge (in contrast to constructing it), and if the state exam does not encourage the scope of critical reading and thinking that the ACT requires, then students are actually being limited by the state exam. Furthermore, teachers and future teachers are reporting feelings of disenfranchisement and disgust with current testing. Those perceptions limit the

potential good these assessments can help enact in this state.

We recommend that the state of Arkansas align the grade 11 literacy exam (which shifts to grade 10 in 2013-2014) with the ACT, and simultaneously seek multiple ways of involving school teachers and university faculty in this systemic change process.

*Dr. Christian Goering is an assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of English Education at the College of Education and Health Professions, University of Arkansas.*

*Dr. David Jolliffe is a professor of English/ Curriculum and Instruction and the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the College of Education and Health Professions, University of Arkansas.*

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### ***Goering and Jolliffe's Key Literacy Recommendations:***

- The state (grade 11) literacy exam should align with the ACT, which is a more rigorous exam
  - Teachers and university faculty should be involved in revisions
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## **IMPROVING CURRICULUM, STANDARDS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

*By Quentin Suffren*

To improve Arkansas' English/Language Arts (ELA) framework—and help ensure that students graduate from high school both college- and career-ready—state policymakers must transform a bloated, repetitive document chock full of pedagogy into a set of clear, rigorous course content expectations. In reading, the current state framework resembles a developmental reading program rather than a set of content standards. It provides little to no guidance about ELA reading content: which kinds of titles should be read, which literary traditions should be studied, and how grade-level texts should be approached to ensure a true vertical progression of

skills *and* knowledge (consequently, mediocre and below-level literature selections are now ensconced in too many a school's curriculum). In writing, Arkansas' framework is more process than product oriented, making it difficult for teachers to interpret, for example, what an 11<sup>th</sup> grade expository essay should “look like” compared to an 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade essay. As a result, ELA classrooms across the state are rife with inconsistency when it comes to grade-level course content and rigor.

With the recent launch of the common standards movement (led, in part, by Dr. Ken James), one hopes that Arkansas will take full advantage of

worthy efforts by other states and organizations. Excellent examples of rigorous, comprehensive ELA standards exist in Massachusetts (the nation's achievement leader) and Indiana. (The Achieve organization has also produced a fine set of ELA Benchmarks). These documents eschew pedagogy for ELA course content coupled with specific examples referencing grade-level texts, activities, and writing applications. In doing so, they provide teacher preparation programs with concrete guidelines about the skills and content knowledge future educators must possess. What's more, these documents were produced via a focused, transparent process involving state policymakers, content experts, and top-notch classroom teachers; such a process could certainly be replicated within Arkansas, should the common standards project go awry.

In short, state policymakers should shamelessly appropriate the excellent standards (and standards-setting processes) already available – and bring them home to Arkansas.

*Quentin Suffren is a Curriculum Specialist at The Learning Institute.*

### ***Suffren's Key English Language Arts Recommendations:***

- ⇒ There should be guidance about ELA reading content
- ⇒ There should be clear, rigorous course skills/content expectations
- ⇒ AR should use already available (and good) standards to assist in process

## **SESSION 2: ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO LICENSURE AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS**

The second session focused on alternative routes to teaching. Patti Froom (Arkansas Department of Education) explained the non-traditional program in Arkansas. Ronald Nurnberg (Teach for America) presented the qualifications and characteristics of TFA teachers. Janet Hugo (Arkansas School for Mathematics, Sciences, and Arts) discussed how she searches for “the best and brightest” teachers. And Scott Shirey (KIPP Delta College Preparatory Schools) addressed “Teacher Quality vs. Teacher Certification.” These three presenters have a common characteristic—they are not required to hire teachers with traditional teacher certification, nor do they think it is particularly important to do so. They look for “experts” in the field and hire people who might not have teaching backgrounds, but who have a strong content knowledge base with a passion to pass it on.

Of course, this is a controversial topic and not everyone agrees with this view. Others think it is important to have a traditional teacher certification to learn the pedagogy, theories, and styles for teaching children. It is also important that teachers have had training and experience in the classroom as

a pre-service teacher with a mentor prior to teaching on their own.

The discussions that arose as a result of these sessions prompted us to create a friendly “debate” on the following pages, and allow two people to present their argument on the topic.

William McComas is a professor of Science Education at the University of Arkansas, and a former secondary teacher. McComas is “pro” teacher certification.

Scott Shirey founded KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in 2002, where he serves as executive director. He taught with Teach for America for three years. Shirey is “con” teacher certification.

We asked McComas and Shirey the below question, and you'll find their responses on the next page.

***Question: Should policymakers demand that all classroom teachers in Arkansas schools be certified with a degree in education?***





## Dr. William F. McComas

*Parks Family Professor of Science Education*

*University of Arkansas, College of Education and Health Professions*

I am pleased to offer a few thoughts on the issue of requiring that teachers have “proper” pre-service education before assuming the responsibility of their roles as educators. Before making any further statements, let me say that I offer these views as a teacher who completed a traditional teacher education program and taught in the secondary school environment for more than a decade. I am now a teacher educator, but one who is occasionally critical of the vast requirements necessary to award a credential. I would also like to submit that I do not believe that everyone with a credential is or will become an equally skilled educator, nor do I believe that everyone lacking such a credential must be barred from classroom service because they are guaranteed to be inept. Furthermore, I am troubled by the knowledge that prohibiting all unlicensed teachers from service in the public schools would deny many students access to any adult working in an instructive role. I do believe that a caring adult who may be unskilled as a teacher is a much better alternative than a stream of substitutes who fail to provide any instructional continuity.

So, with these perspectives in mind, let me state firmly that in the vast majority of cases, schools operating with support from state funds should permit only properly educated individuals from assuming control of the education of youngsters. The way in which the majority of professions in this nation determine who is properly educated is to grant a license or credential following some period of formal instruction and apprentice experience. Recently when I asked my hair stylist how long it took for her to earn her cosmetology license, she responded, “ten months of full time study and 1,500 hours of supervised practice.” Curiously, this is almost exactly the same amount of time we expect of our teacher education candidates in the MAT program at the University of Arkansas. Doesn’t it seem reasonable to expect that our teachers will be at least as well trained as those who provide our manicures and hair cuts? There is no guarantee that all licensed cosmetologists or all licensed teachers will be equally skilled, but until we find a valid and reliable way to determine – in advance – who does not need such advanced training, I will always err on the side of demanding the training that comes with a licensure program.

I recognize that there are all sorts of alternative programs for admitting caring adults to the teaching profession. Some are better than others. I am quite willing to consider almost any program that provides the necessary theoretical and practical training likely to contribute to providing reasonable outcomes in the classroom. Perhaps we could engage in some sort of diagnosis and prescription that would allow some folks to be fast tracked into school service. A middle aged individual with an MS degree in biology who has been an industrial trainer for years and wants to be a science instructor clearly will need fewer formal experiences before becoming a teacher, particularly when contrasted with the 20 year old fresh from a BS program in the sciences who has not even worked with kids at a summer camp!

Every year, individuals participate in a wide variety of alternative programs who believe that they can take a few summer classes and then enter the classroom. There are huge risks associated with permitting such routes to classroom service. First, even well educated new instructors face all sorts of challenges in their first few years, problems that are severely compounded for those without any real prior apprenticeships. Even the most well educated new instructors take several years to reach their stride; during that time many of the alternatively trained teachers have already moved on to other pursuits. Second, the alternative route debases the core of teacher education that is recognized as useful and necessary. No, I am not arguing for maintenance of the status quo but I am strongly suggesting that even the “gatekeeper” function of more traditional teacher education programs plays a very useful role. I was recently approached by someone who wanted to be a science teacher who was dismayed by the 10 months and 1,500 hours required. He announced that he would find an alternative program because our program would take too long. I wonder how many of us would like to be treated by the doctor who just did not have the time to go to medical school.

Yes, we should develop diagnostic teacher education programs that might build on the strengths of individuals and we must consider how much of our traditional teacher education requirements really add to classroom effectiveness. However, until these alternatives are developed and validated, as a tax payer, a parent, and educator, I will demand that our teachers enter schools as teachers through the front door, rather than the back.

## Scott Shirey

*Executive Director*

*KIPP Delta College Preparatory School*



Absolutely not. Education is always full of buzzwords, so much so that it is hard to keep up with them all. One of the latest is the word “standards.” Schools promote themselves as having “high standards for their students” or brag that their curriculum is “standards-driven.” Schools and teachers alike argue that their “standards” are more rigorous than their neighbor’s. It is one of those buzzwords where everyone nods their head in agreement that we need better “standards.” While I am certainly one that advocates for standards in the classroom, what happens when “standards” become gatekeepers and not gateways?

I would argue that teacher certification has become just that. Where it should be a gateway to success, it has become a gatekeeper that too often prevents quality teachers from getting into the classroom. First, no one can underscore the impact of quality teacher training, but we all know there are multiple ways to approach this beyond requiring degrees in education. Teach For America (TFA) is a great example of this. In fact, a Mathematica study in 2004 revealed that students of TFA teachers on average made more progress in reading and math when compared to students of traditionally trained novice teachers and outperformed veteran teachers in math. And this is while working in the highest need areas of the country.

Furthermore, Teach For America does have standards, and these are the standards that lead to real student achievement. In 2008, Teach For America corps members had an average SAT score of 1320 with an average GPA of 3.6. 95% of them held leadership positions on campus and 70% of them attended some of the most competitive colleges and universities in the country. TFA is a perfect example of an organization using standards to provide a gateway to student achievement, while a certification process requiring a degree can serve as a gatekeeper.

Charter schools are another example of providing new gateways to success. Often in low income communities around the country, where traditional schools requiring degrees in education have fallen short, charter schools have found success. KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) has sixty-six such schools, serving students from low income communities, 96% of whom are Latino or African-American and 81% of whom qualify for free/reduced lunch. Last year, 100% of KIPP’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes outperformed the local district in math and 94% of those same 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes outperformed the local district in language. KIPP schools provided a gateway beyond the traditional system and met high standards.

In communities that are struggling to stay afloat, in schools that are struggling to fill teacher vacancies, and in a profession that is typically under appreciated, the last thing we need are more gatekeepers preventing, in the name of “high standards,” smart, motivated people from serving children in need. What we need are more gateways to success.

**What are your thoughts on traditional vs. non-traditional licensure for teachers?**

**We want to hear from you!**

**Go to [this survey](#) and vote on who made the most convincing argument, and leave comments about your own views on teacher licensing standards.**

## SESSION 3: USEFUL INDICES OF TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

The final session wrapped up the conference by addressing indices of teacher effectiveness. Charity Smith (Arkansas Department of Education) addressed the question, “What do student achievement data say about teaching effectiveness?” Sandra Stotsky (University of Arkansas) discussed

her ideas for a teacher quality report card. The day ended with Representative Dave Rainey and Senator Jimmy Jeffress talking about what lawmakers need to know about teachers in order to improve teacher quality.

## IDEAS FOR A TEACHER QUALITY REPORT CARD

*By Sandra Stotsky*

The chief characteristic of effective teachers is knowledge of the subject they teach. That is all we know from good research, even though we all want additional qualities in a K-12 teacher. And the only way at present that we can ensure that new teachers know the subject they teach is by means of academically strong licensure tests.

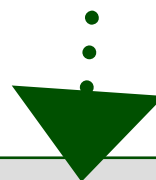
However, the Arkansas framework for its teacher licensure tests suggests that its educational policy makers are overly concerned about how teachers teach, and not sufficiently concerned about whether teachers know enough about a subject to teach it. Arkansas should consider raising the cut scores on the subject area tests it now requires and adding academically stronger tests in several key areas or, at the least, eliminating the pedagogical tests it now requires. This would help to ensure that all teachers *begin* their teaching careers with more adequate academic backgrounds than they now do, and with a familiarity with teaching practices that are supported by evidence from high quality research.

If Arkansas is unwilling to require additional licensure tests, raise cut scores, eliminate seemingly counterproductive pedagogical tests, or develop academically stronger tests for every subject area, it can still establish a number of measures by which to gauge increases, decreases, or plateaus in teacher quality as defined by teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach. The paper on indices for teacher quality in Arkansas that I gave at the April 28 conference lists these measures and the rationale for them. Implementing their use would help state

policy makers to find out if their policies and appropriations actually improve the overall academic quality of the state's teaching force.

*Sandra Stotsky holds the Endowed Chair in Teacher Quality at the College of Education and Health Professions, University of Arkansas. To view this paper, visit this link:*

*[http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/2009\\_Conference/Sandra\\_Stotsky\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/2009_Conference/Sandra_Stotsky_Paper.pdf)*



### ***Stotsky's Key Recommendations:***

- Raise cut scores on subject area licensure tests
- Add academically stronger licensure tests
- Eliminate pedagogical licensure tests
- The main characteristic of an effective teacher is the knowledge of the subject they teach



## FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE LEGISLATURE



Senator Joyce Elliott was the keynote address speaker at the 2009 OEP “Teacher Quality” conference. Senator Elliott is currently Chair of the Joint Education Committee. She is trained with a BA and MA in English from Arkansas universities. Senator Elliott has taught high school in Arkansas, Texas, Florida, and Minnesota for more

than 30 years. She then turned to a different type of public service, running and winning seats in the house in 2001, 2003, and 2005. In June of 2004, Senator Elliott left the classroom and began working for the College Board. There she focused on expanding access of advanced placement curriculum to students in under-represented AP classes, such as African American, Latino, and low-income students. Now Joyce is back in the capital as a senator, and we were very fortunate to hear her perspective on K-12 teacher quality in Arkansas.

Senator Elliott said that she believes education is the most essential of all of our institutions. And the most important component of the education institution is the teachers. However, she said that from experience she knows that some teachers work hard and do a great job, some work hard and don’t do a great job, and some do neither. Which is why, she proposed, the conversation must be addressed – because we need “a revolution in our institution and in teacher quality.”

Senator Elliott presented her views in three categories: teacher quality as it relates to teachers, the public, and the governor and legislators. We summarize some of Senator Elliott’s key points in the sidebar. Senator Elliott concluded by saying that “Arkansas has done a great deal to make sure we have standards that folks are proud of and we have raised taxes to deliver educational quality.” Elliott thinks “we have an execution problem, which is tied to teacher quality.” She said that part of the problem is that “we don’t want to hear the truth, because the truth will obligate us to do something about it.”

*“If I had to choose one thing out of everything it takes to be a highly qualified teacher, it would be [content knowledge]”*

### I. How Teachers Can Improve Teacher Quality

- A. Teachers should not look at teaching as a part time career.
- B. Teachers need to realize that a higher degree does not make you better than a peer.
- C. Teachers should study teacher training in other, successful countries and borrow ideas.
- D. Teachers must insist on a 21<sup>st</sup> century compensation strategy, paying teachers based on effectiveness rather than seniority.

### II. How the Public Can Improve Teacher Quality

- A. The public should honor, support, and demand high quality.
- B. The public should examine and be engaged in classrooms.
- C. The public should support high standards in the classroom, even if that means your kids make lower grades.
- D. The public should financially support education.

### III. How Governors and Legislators Can Improve Teacher Quality

- A. Legislators should insist on permanency in teacher quality.
  1. TFA is a great program that fills a void, but legislators need to look for ways to promote long-lasting teachers.
  2. Talk together about what it means to have highly qualified teachers.
- B. Legislators should put a 21<sup>st</sup> century salary schedule in place.
  1. Start by raising the base salary.
  2. Modify the salary schedule.
  3. Create meaningful evaluations with more accountability that leads to support, improvement, and dismissal when appropriate.
- C. Insist on content knowledge in the licensing process.

## COMMON STANDARDS MOVEMENT

*Though not directly addressed at the conference, national standards have been a common topic as of late. As such, state standards may be less important if national standards are adopted in the future. Therefore, it is reasonable to present an update on the national standards movement in this newsletter. Stuart Buck, a research associate at the Office for Education Policy, has researched the happenings around the discussion of national standards and Arkansas' role in the matter.*

Over the past two decades, federal politicians have occasionally tried to push for national education standards. As *Education Week* notes, “while then-President George H.W. Bush was in office, an advisory panel on education recommended national standards and national tests,” and President Clinton later “proposed creating national tests in 4th grade reading and 8th grade mathematics.”

In both cases the effort failed, largely due to widespread belief that states should be left to formulate their own education standards. Indeed, one of the potential flaws with such an effort is the wide difference of opinion as to how much any national standards should emphasize phonics or traditional math algorithms, to say nothing of evolution and sex education. Thus, a set of national standards might end up being one-size-fits-all, in a way that many people view as unacceptable or as the lowest common denominator.

On the other hand, all 50 states have spent the past decade developing their own standards and tests, particularly after No Child Left Behind. Many people have begun to believe that the fundamentals of reading and math are the same regardless of geographic location, and that it makes no sense for 50 states to reinvent the wheel rather than setting a common goal.

Inspired by this latter belief, 49 states and territories (with the long exceptions of Alaska, Missouri, South Carolina, and Texas) have committed to create a set of national education standards that, although not mandatory, are intended to be adopted in individual states. Indeed, Arkansas has, up until now, taken the

lead in this new effort. As the president of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), Arkansas education commissioner T. Kenneth James (who recently resigned) had been “one of the drivers behind the national initiative,” in the words of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. He told that newspaper, “We’ve been talking around this situation for a good number of years. I think for the first time in my 36 years as an educator we have the stars aligned. You have all these entities lined up clearly understanding that it makes no rhyme or reason in this country why we would have different standards across the different states with the mobility we have in our student population and among teachers.”

Commissioner James testified at an April 2009 hearing before Congress’s House Education and Labor Committee. In addition to making a case that national standards are “an idea whose time has truly arrived,” and as “the only way we, as a nation, will thrive,” he pointed out that there is strong state-wide support in Arkansas for national standards:

*As the Arkansas Commissioner of Education, I have witnessed another level of support for common standards that I must share with you. On April 10, I met with superintendents, school board members, and other school officials from across my state to discuss the education provisions of the Recovery Act. We had more than 1,100 people present, all anxious to learn about the stimulus funding, including how the money could be most effectively spent. After nearly two hours of discussing that topic, I mentioned that I would be flying to Chicago the following week to meet with my colleagues about creating state-led common standards. That was the first time the room erupted in applause.*

Dr. James continued his testimony by pointing out that while Arkansas “was supposed to update” its English standards this summer, he has “decided to put that process on hold with the expectation that this coalition of states will move forward in the state-led common standard-setting process.”

Following a national meeting in April, the new national effort — entitled the Common Core State Standards Initiative — was officially announced on June 1, 2009. The announcement noted:

*The Common Core State Standards Initiative is being jointly led by the [National Governors Association] Center and CCSSO in partnership with Achieve, Inc., ACT, and the College Board. It builds directly on recent efforts of leading organizations and states that have focused on developing college-and career-ready standards and ensures that these standards can be internationally benchmarked to top-performing countries around the world. The goal is to have a common core of state standards that states can voluntarily adopt. States may choose to include additional standards beyond the common core as long as the common core represents at least 85 percent of the state's standards in English-language arts and mathematics.*

As these national standards are crafted throughout 2009, it remains to be seen how rigorous they will be, let alone how they will affect the day-to-day process of teaching in the classroom. As the *Washington Post* reported, “There will be no prescription for how teachers get there, avoiding nettlesome discussions about whether phonics or whole language is a better method of teaching reading; whether students should be drilled in math facts; or whether eighth-graders should read ‘The Great Gatsby’ or ‘To Kill a Mockingbird.’”

The fact that states are now leading the effort to create national standards makes it all the more likely that the effort will succeed (unlike in previous decades). At the same time, federal government support and involvement in the effort may be important. As *Education Week* reported, Mr. James “sees a limited role for the federal government in helping to spur the effort. Mr. Duncan and top congressional education leaders can try using the ‘bully pulpit’ to help bolster the movement. And they can provide increased federal resources, particularly for assessments and professional

development.” That federal support has already begun to emerge. “Lawmakers from both parties in Congress have applauded an effort already under way . . . to come up with uniform, rigorous standards that states can adopt.” And Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, has said he “wants to use part of the \$5 billion in . . . funds included in the economic-stimulus package to help fuel the drive for common standards.”

As of July 1, 2009, the Common Core initiative announced its working groups that will be formulating standards in both English and math. These standards are expected to be completed by December 2009.

In summary, the current push for national standards bears a greater chance of success than the failed initiatives of the 1990s. Given the growth of state standards and state testing over the past decade, state education officials and the general public are more comfortable with the notion of collaborating in setting common standards to ensure that students will be exposed to the same knowledge and skills and held to the same standards.

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The Office for Education Policy seeks to be a resource that aids state policymakers, educators, administrators, and other leaders in thoughtful decision-making concerning K-12 education in the State of Arkansas.

**LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**

Dear Colleagues,

In this issue of *Education Policy News*, we highlight presentations made at our Teacher Quality conference last April. The conference attendees were treated to several interesting sessions and many provocative ideas raised by our speakers. Here are just a few:

Senator Joyce Elliott made the call for a revamped teacher compensation system, one which incorporated some measure of teacher effectiveness.

Bill McComas and Quentin Suffren made strong arguments in favor of more specific guidelines in the Arkansas Frameworks for science and language arts. These two also argued that Arkansas should take the lead in developing regional or national standards.

Scott Shirey urged policymakers to allow school administrators more flexibility in teacher hiring, so that he could hire excellent

but uncertified teachers when needed.

Sandra Stotsky encouraged our state education leaders to ensure that our teacher licensure exams are based on a very solid foundation of content knowledge.

And these comments only represent the tip of the iceberg. Please read through this issue to learn more from our excellent set of speakers. And, we hope to see even more of you next spring at our 3rd annual OEP conference. The theme will be school leadership... We will again be inviting an exciting set of speakers. We will share more information as it becomes available.

We hope you are enjoying the beginning of the school year. As always, thanks for your interest and support.

Respectfully,

Gary Ritter

Director, *Office for Education Policy*



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