

State Board Update

to the

New Hampshire Coalition for Business and Education

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Bill Duncan

After years of quiet productivity that didn't draw much attention, there's a drama playing out at the SBOE, as Gary Groleau can attest. Instead of empty chairs in the audience, 20 or 25 people sign up for each public comment session lately and public testimony takes the first hour - or at the June 8th meeting, resumed at the end of the meeting. SBOE members get lots of emails on education issues of all kinds and are targets of broad RTK requests. The press is there.

Most meetings used to be over by lunchtime. Our last meeting was 8 hours long, ending at 5:00.

So it's a new day at the state board, with 3 new members, including the chair – and, of course, we have a new commissioner. And they are challenging the board's long-standing assumptions. You could have wondered just how our schools felt the impact of the state board. Now the impact will be clear.

In 8 years with commissioner Ginny Barry, much of that with Tom as chair, policy centered on competency, personalization, updating our academic standards, supporting home-grown charter schools - and on innovation. Ginny and Paul Leather enabled the development of the PACE initiative, led by the districts themselves, as a locally managed assessment alternative to the annual top down assessment - a whole new approach integrated into daily learning and driven by teachers.

And there is still much consistency and follow through - competency, personalization, PACE continue to be strong board and department commitments. But there are big changes as well, with the new emphasis on choice - at the individual student level, yes, and among public schools, but now to include private and home schools as well.

A central issue has become who has what authority. That plays out in a number of ways, but today I'll just report to you on the issue that has dominated the last several meetings, - whether our English and math standards need to be rewritten.

I can hear you saying, "Wait a minute. Didn't we just have that debate?"

We did. Common Core opponents have since 2013 laid out the arguments against the

standards - to the legislature, in our communities, and to a number of local school boards. Tom and I used to barnstorm the state for public forums. But people who actually used the standards thought they were good, so nothing changed.

Now our education commissioner is making those same arguments anew. [Here are the points the commissioner made at the June 8 board meeting](#), along with my comments in response.

So recent board meetings have been all about the English and math standards our teachers have been building their lesson plans on in recent years. Should the Common Core standards be substantially revised or even replaced - maybe by standards like those developed in the early 2000's under the leadership of Dr. Sandra Stotsky in Massachusetts?

But this time around people are coming out in droves to respond. We've had over 70 emails and presentations - no form letters - in just the last two months. Fourteen have opposed the standards, though none came from classroom educators. The rest have come from teachers, the business community, the superintendents, parents, everyone you can think of, saying the standards are working well and it's time to move on.

Opponents' arguments are familiar.

The Common Core has failed. The argument goes that, since the Common Core was adopted in 2010, remediation rates have not gone down and test scores have not gone up.

Most of us would say that improving student achievement is a bigger project than standards alone, but I just have to read you what Mary Wilke of Concord wrote to the board:

“I would like to address an issue that was raised by some speakers and reiterated by Commissioner Edelblut at the Board meeting last Thursday, June 8. [T]he standards require that high school juniors and seniors “examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.” It seems safe to say...that a high school graduate with full mastery of the above described skills would not need remedial courses at college and would not be seen by an employer as deficient in writing. If a student is unprepared for college/business writing, it's not because the standards are inadequate, but because for some reason s/he has not achieved them.”

I've never met Mary. But you can see that the public is engaged in this debate like never before.

States are walking away from the Common Core. This is a prediction we have heard for

years. The truth is that while some 20 states have mounted extensive standards reviews, asking for detailed public and educator feedback, they have made minor changes, rebranded the standards, and moved on with the same high standards in place. Forty-two states, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense use the Common Core standards, often modified to fit local priorities. One state, Oklahoma, has replaced its standards, to universally disastrous reviews.

Other themes. You do still hear that the standards are hard to understand, they are not developmentally appropriate and that the math is too complicated. But it's not 2013 any more. Thousands of New Hampshire teachers now have years of classroom experience to speak from. Just so you can hear their voices, here are a few of them:

Understandable?

Sanborn Regional High School English Teacher Evan Czyzowski told us,

“I will say to you, as a teacher, when I first saw the standards, I said, “Woah, what is all this language?” I had to process it... I had to develop lessons in my classroom to make them work. And when I did that, they seemed very practical.”

Jenn Manning, Memorial Elementary School Kindergarten Teachers in Kingston, waited all day for an opportunity to tell us in the public comment session,

“There has been extensive work that teachers have done over the years to really understand these standards....I don't sit in front of these standards and ever have the feeling that I don't understand.”

Developmentally appropriate?

Jenn Manning also said,

“At first, I did think [the standards] were very rigorous, but once I got in and started working with my students I was pleasantly surprised at how they could approach them...When the kids are engaged [this way], they are communicating more. They are cooperating more.... The Common Core really did bring our students to another level.”

Kindergarten teacher Linda Thanas, from the Pleasant Street School in Laconia, told us,

“I was very hesitant because this was a big change.... [and] kindergarteners need to play. The Common Core allows me...to support the children as they go to deeper levels in their learning.... We're meeting the standards but we're meeting the child's needs first....

One child has cerebral palsy.... She could not even make a straight line. She writes numbers, just like any other child in the classroom now....

Math too complex?

Assistant Superintendent Todd Allen said that, after Oyster River School District made a strategic commitment to making change based on the Common Core,

“Five years ago we had 27 kids in 8th grade taking Algebra. Today we have 111 kids successfully taking Algebra.”

Jen Eccleston, Mathematics Coach, Clark-Wilkins Elementary School in Amherst, said,

"What does it mean to know math? ...In our district, we have defined knowing as both conceptual and procedural understanding."

Stephen McDonough, Mathematics Teacher and Math Department Chair, Laconia High School,

"We are starting to see the results. Our SAT scores went up by 20 points last year."

So that's it. That's the debate as framed by Common Core opponents and, now, the commissioner.

But there is very little support among public education constituencies for changing the standards. You've rarely seen such unanimity:

Governor Chris Sununu [told the board in February](#),

“It's not opposition to the Common Core...it's not the standards that I have issue with and I think Frank would agree...it's how we assess those standards...”

UNH: Mark W. Huddleston

“...given the current efficacy of the existing standards...we do not see a pedagogical justification for [revising the standards] at this time, and warn that creating new standards could have a quite damaging effect on the reform initiatives currently underway.”

NH PTA: Brenda Willis, Executive Director

"New Hampshire PTA and its 10,000 members urges you to stay the course and keep the English language arts and math... standards in place for our students."

BIA: Val Zanchuk, Chair (at the time of the his May 11 SBOE presentation)

“The existing math and language arts standards are sufficiently rigorous and when

mastered, will prepare students for college and career success....We believe that an attempt to refine, amend, or rewrite educational standards is unnecessary.”

NEA NH, Megan Tuttle, president

"The standards themselves provide wide flexibility for varying approaches to curriculum, lesson plans and styles of classroom instruction. Our teachers feel empowered to make changes that might be a better fit with the students in their classrooms. New Hampshire’s ELA and math standards have stood the test of time in our classrooms. We urge the state board to leave them in place”

School Leaders came from all over the State to the May 11 SBOE meeting

NHSAA Executive Director Carl Ladd:

"Constantly relitigating the Common Core war is really hampering the schools and districts from developing the model that communities and businesses are looking for."

Merrimack School District assistant superintendent Mark McLaughlin:

"The Merrimack School District firmly believes that the Common Core State Standards have tremendous value and have been the chief cause of our teachers and our students collective growth.

Esther Asbell, Assistant Superintendent, SAU 16:

“Any revisions to these NH College and Career Standards would invalidate all of the work our teachers have completed over the past five years.”

Lisa A. Witte, Superintendent, Monadnock Regional School District:

“I am writing today to urge you to support the work of educators around the state and keep the current ELA and Math standards in place.”

Hampton Superintendent Kathleen Murphy

“The Math debate...has been settled. The teachers recognize that memorization as a sole reliance to learn math does not net the deep understanding students need when they are challenged by higher level Mathematics.”

Oyster River School District Assistant Superintendent Todd Allen:

“I implore you to stick with the College and Career Ready standards.

Laconia superintendent Brendan Minnihan:

"PLEASE, I implore you, don't go back and make us start again."

Parents, teachers and citizens have testified and emailed

Sarah Henry, Concord pediatrician:

"It is critical that we demonstrate a process of supporting education that is fair, and not ideological, so that everybody can have confidence that when they come to New Hampshire and they spend their tax dollars here and they bring their families here and they bring their businesses here that they're in the right place."

I think that you did absolutely the right thing when you approved and you endorsed the Next Generation Science Standards in April and I hope that that kind of thoughtful principled consideration will lead to the same outcomes here.

Deb Wiswell, former NHDOE staffer who guided NH CCSS development

"Almost 300 teachers gave us valuable feedback that was then passed along during the weekly calls to the Common Core writers. And to our amazement, they listened. Each successive draft included almost all of the revisions proposed by NH teachers."

Elizabeth Lewis, Nashua

"The current math and ELA standards are working... Don't try to fix what isn't broken. Look to areas that need improvement, like social studies and civics."

Brittany Pye, Parent, Grantham, school board member

"The teachers and administrators at our school do an incredible job balancing the standards and expectations of the state with the real life needs of our students. They take on this work in their own time, they come to the table willingly and with deep passion for their work. They are able to do this because they are on the ground every day with these students and they know what works, what doesn't work, and what will yield the best results."

Mary Ann Driscoll, just retired Title I Reading Coach in Portsmouth elementary schools

"The Common Core standards are more rigorous and of a higher quality than any other standards I had seen in 20 years of teaching. Implementing the standards was a lot of work, over several years...a great deal of time was spent in professional development... We read books... We hired consultants to help us, we went to the Columbia School of Education in the summer to listen to experts on the ELA Common Core.... We had carefully planned for the challenges of the Common Core, and our students responded. It was fun,

challenging and rewarding when we saw the results of this work in our classrooms."

Matthew Murray, Parent, Merrimack

"...my wife and I have not felt that our children have been pushed beyond their limits or required to do things for which they have not been developmentally ready. The standards themselves are apparently developmentally appropriate in the hands of good teachers such as we have."

...and many more.

The commissioner seemed to say at the June 8 board meeting that he would nonetheless do an informal, unofficial standards review, and that it would have these elements:

- Editing the current standards for clarity, something he has told us he is doing himself.
- Taking a close look at draft Massachusetts standards that were developed in under Dr. Sandra Stotsky's leadership but never used.
- Review standards changes other states have made.
- Circulate to other districts the changes Exeter has made.

So what should we expect from here?

We have re-established with everyone the fact that only the New Hampshire Board of Education can initiate a formal standards review with full public input, hearings, official drafts and feedback, all resulting in a change of the standards.

However, the education commissioner - or anyone else in the state - can request that the board initiate an formal standards review at any time or undertake an informal standards review, done in any way.

An informal review like that would have no impact on the actual standards until the board actually initiated and completed a formal review. If the board wanted to consider Dr. Stotsky's standards or another proposal at some point in the future, it could open a formal standards review, with a full slate of public feedback mechanisms – web-based standard-by-standard feedback, forums, draft reviews, etc. Committees of educators would be formed to review and write, psychometric guidance would ensure that the resulting standards were assessable, third parties would review drafts, and the rest of the infrastructure needed for a credible standards review would be put in place.

Until all that happens, there will be no change to the standards our teachers use in their

classrooms.

We often observe how difficult it is to move our large complex public education system forward. But when you see the new standards at work in every classroom you visit and hear what educators tell the board about how, even if they were daunted and doubtful at first, they are excited about how their students have responded to these higher and clearer expectations, you see what real leadership can accomplish. The superintendents, teachers, the BIA and many others partnered with the department to make the standards successful.

Now our job is to support our educators and school leaders. Give them the space to do their work. And I think that will happen.

But it will take continued engagement from the Coalition, Reaching Higher, the business community and parents. So keep it up! And be sure the board hears from you.