

Dr. Ken James' Testimony
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
April 29, 2009

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today about the state-led common standards initiative being guided by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (NGA). Voluntary state collaboration to develop a common core of high standards is an idea whose time has truly arrived.

I come to you today in dual roles: as the lead education officer in my home state of Arkansas and as president of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). In both of these positions, I have witnessed not only widespread support for a state-led common standards setting process, but a sincere belief that states *must* lead this effort for the good of our young people and for the good of our country.

CCSSO and NGA began to facilitate a dialogue between state leaders about the state-led common standards initiative more than two years ago. Significant progress was made during this period and a number of states are now poised to join a voluntary, state-led standards setting process, which adheres to several key principles.

First and foremost, this is a voluntary, state-led effort to establish a common core of standards across the states. Let me be clear, this is not an effort to establish federal standards. The effort to establish a common core will build directly on the recent work of leading states and initiatives that have focused on college- and career-ready standards. Leading states will be called upon to participate and add their knowledge to the standards setting process, and it is expected that leading states, based on their prior work, will be furthest along toward adoption of the common core. Furthermore, no state will see their standards lowered as a result of this collaboration. Rather, the purpose of the common state standards initiative is to raise the bar for all states by drawing on the best research and evidence from leading states and experts regarding, among other things, college- and work-readiness, rigorous knowledge and skills, and international benchmarking.

In March, President Obama made a visit to the Council of Chief State School Officers' annual legislative meeting here in Washington, D.C. The state chiefs were honored by the President's appearance, but more importantly were enthused by his support of a state-led common standards initiative. His support of a state-led approach to

addressing this important issue was echoed heartily later at the same meeting by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Two weeks ago, CCSSO and the NGA hosted a meeting for state chiefs and governors' education advisors whose states might be interested in formally joining a coalition to commit to engaging in a process that would ultimately deliver the first sets of common standards in the areas of mathematics and English language arts. That meeting occurred on April 17 in Chicago; and I am pleased to report that 40 of my colleagues along with representatives from their governors' offices attended. In addition, we were joined by representatives from Achieve, the College Board, ACT, and the National Governors Association. That makes 41 states and many key stakeholders expressing a strong interest in pursuing this goal of state-led common standards. Realizing that not all states will be able to immediately commit to this important effort, I was still extremely encouraged by the breadth of interest across the country. And I do believe that we will have a strong showing of states ready to continue the next stage of the standards development process during the coming weeks and months.

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.

Clearly, state-led common standards have the support and excitement from folks all the way from the President of the United States to superintendents and school board members in rural towns of Arkansas. I'd call that a broad base of support, indeed.

Here is why I think people at all levels are ready to embark on this initiative. Foremost, we are all well aware of the economic imperative for this country to take drastic steps in the realm of education to create a competitive workforce and maintain our role as a world leader. The most basic way to impact student achievement to

meet this demand is to guarantee that what is being taught in classrooms in every ZIP code of this nation is both rigorous and relevant.

Over the last several years, many individual states have made great strides in developing high-quality standards and improving their assessments. These efforts provide a strong foundation for further action. For example, a majority of states (35) have joined the American Diploma Project (ADP) and have worked individually to align their state standards with college and work expectations. Of the 15 states that have completed this work, studies show significant similarities in core standards across the states. States also have made progress through initiatives to upgrade standards and assessments, for example, the New England Common Assessment Program.

Let me tell you how that standard-setting process works in Arkansas. Every summer, we convene educators from across the state for two, intensive weeks to tackle the standards for whatever subjects are to be updated. This summer Arkansas *was* supposed to update English language arts. You may have detected the strain in my voice when I say “*was*,” as I have 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.

Nevertheless, typically when those educators come to Little Rock, they engage in a process that requires rigorous hours over two weeks ensuring that they have considered the most current and relevant research and evidence leading to the delivery of the most appropriate standards for the subject at hand. Those two weeks are followed by several weekend sessions throughout the year until the standards are approved by the State Board of Education. It's a good process.

But perhaps you too see the inefficiency of replicating such efforts at least 50 times – once in each state and the territories. This redundancy is another compelling reason for states – and for my local educators – to want to move forward in the effort of state-led common standards. And, again, building on the work in many states, we already have evidence that key aspects of commonality among state standards already exist and that repeating standard setting efforts for each subject in each state is unnecessarily costly in terms of time, energy and money.

Let me end by paraphrasing something I heard Intel's chairman Craig Barrett say: business knows no borders, and business and industry will go to where the talent is.

States are not preparing our students to compete with students in the neighboring school district or even the neighboring state. We are preparing them to compete globally and, in order to do so, we must make sure that we equip students across this nation -- in areas rural and metropolitan, mountainous or Delta flatland, rich or poor -- with the learning blocks to reach the same high standards. That is the only way we, as a nation, will thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.