



**Testimony of Michael Cohen  
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New York State Senate Education Committee  
October 1, 2013**

**INTRODUCTION**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for invitation to testify before you today. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards and aligned summative assessments is a key part of the Regents Reform Plan. My responsibility today is to put New York State's efforts in these areas into broader national perspective and to suggest issues that members of this committee, and other state education policymakers, should keep in mind as the state moves forward on this agenda.

Before doing so, however, I want to tell you a little bit about Achieve, so you understand the perspective I bring to this discussion. Achieve is an independent, bipartisan nonprofit education reform organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability in order to prepare all young people for college, career and citizenship. We were founded at the 1996 National Education Summit held at IBM's conference center in Palisades New York.. This was a unique gathering of governors, business leaders and educators who met to consider ways to strengthen and continuously improve state standards based reforms. One of the action steps agreed to by Summit participants was to create an entity -- Achieve -- to be an independent clearinghouse of information about the quality of state standards, assessment and accountability systems.

Since its inception Achieve has helped more than 40 states strengthen the rigor, clarity, focus and coherence of state standards. Our signature program has been the American Diploma Project, a research and development project that worked with postsecondary faculty and employers in five states to identify the math and literacy skills essential for success in postsecondary education and training programs. This work was guided by the recognition that nearly two-thirds of jobs will require some postsecondary training or education beyond high school, in career training programs that lead to industry-recognized credential, or two- or four-year colleges and graduate programs. It is guided by the principle that all young people need to become “career ready” -- including but not only those who enroll in 4-year colleges -- and that their K-12 education should equip them with a core set of skills that will enable them to pursue the career of their choice, and the education and training pathways needed to reach their career goals. It is anchored in research that indicates that there is a core set of literacy and mathematics skills that high school graduates must develop in order to succeed in any postsecondary education or training program. And it is informed by the sobering reality that each year too many students graduate from high school poorly prepared for the postsecondary education or careers. In New York, more than 25% of first year college students, and nearly half of those in 2-year institutions, are required to take one or more remedial courses. These students pay college tuition for those courses, do not earn college credit, and are generally half as likely as their better prepared peers to earn a postsecondary degree.

Achieve’s research also found that virtually no states required students to demonstrate these skills in order to earn a high school diploma. In fact, we found that few states had incorporated these skills into state math and ELA standards, or the courses and tests students were required to take in order to graduate from high school. In short, there was a yawning “expectations gap” between the skills needed for postsecondary success and those needed to graduate from high school.

At a National Education Summit in 2005 we launched the American Diploma Project Network by challenged states to close this “expectation gap” by aligning high school standards, assessments and requirements for high school graduation with the skill demands of college and careers. The American Diploma Project Network now includes 35 states that educate nearly 90% of the public school students in the U.S.; each of these states is committed to aligning high school standards, assessments and requirements for high school graduation with the skill demands of college and careers. When the American Diploma Project Network was launched, college and career readiness for all students was merely an idea. Today, it is a national priority and at the top of the education policy agenda in all states.

One component of Achieve’s support to states in the Network was to help each state align its mathematics and English Language Arts high school level standards with the demands of postsecondary education and careers, including career training and workforce development programs. Participating states assembled teams of postsecondary faculty, representatives of employers and workforce development programs, and high school teachers and curriculum specialists. These teams reviewed national and state-specific evidence regarding the college and career readiness of high school graduates, examples of work students typically undertake in first-year courses, as well as college-ready standards developed by ACT and College Board. Based on these and other analyses, states adopted college and career standards in mathematics and English Language Arts.

Achieve’s analysis of these standards in nearly 20 states identified a “common core” of rigorous expectations across the participating states. This work provided a foundation for the development of the Common Core State Standards, as well as an existence proof of the feasibility of a state-led effort to create common standards.

As a result, Achieve worked closely with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to support the development of the Common Core State Standards, and was selected by the Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment consortium of states to be its project management partner. New York is one of PARCC's Governing States; John King is a member of the PARCC Governing Board. More recently, Achieve has helped 26 states develop and begin to adopt Next Generation Science Standards

### **THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

Since their release in 2010, 45 states, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy.

The Common Core standards are designed to help prepare students for college and careers. They carefully and deliberately reflect the quantitative reasoning and literacy skills demanded by the real world – postsecondary education and training programs – as well as the expectations of students in countries with whom we compete economically. They incorporate they critical thinking, reasoning and problem solving skills required for citizenship in a diverse, complex society.

There are several key advances compared to existing state standards, help students develop the problem solving and reasoning skills necessary for postsecondary success, and which call for fundamental shifts in instructional practices. For example:

In English Language Arts/Literacy, these include:

- A balance between literature and ***nonfiction and informational texts***, supported by ***literacy*** standards for science, history, and technical subjects to enable students to read and write in a wider range of contexts.
- An emphasis on building academic vocabulary and building knowledge in the core disciplines, starting in the early grades.

- An emphasis on explanatory writing, including writing and speaking using ***evidence drawn from texts*** to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information.
- Regular practice with increasingly ***complex text*** and its academic language, or words that may appear in a variety of contexts.

In Mathematics, these include:

- A sharper ***focus*** on fewer key topics in each grade to allow educators and students to go deeper into the content so students can better understand concepts.
- A ***coherent*** progression of learning across grades and across concepts, with each progression resulting in students' fluency in a given concept. Each standard is not a new event, but an extension of previous learning.
- ***Rigor*** through mathematical practices that foster reasoning, ***flexible and real-world application***, and deeper ***conceptual understanding*** across the discipline.

### **COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION**

The effective implementation of standards is both a state and local responsibility. Since the inception of the standards movement in the 1990's, most states focused their efforts on the development of state standards, aligned assessments and accountability systems, with limited if any attention to the provision of curriculum, instructional materials and professional development. Decisions about these matters were typically left to local school districts, particularly in states with strong local control norms. Some districts had the capacity to address these matters effectively, while others did not. As a result, implementation of state standards was often quite uneven within the state, and teachers and principals were often left to their own devices to find or develop instructional materials that were well aligned to the standards.

Most states have learned from this experience. Particularly because the Common Core State Standards demand much more significant changes in classroom instruction than did previous state standards, states are generally taking a more active role in helping to provide tools and supports to classrooms teachers and principals.

Achieve has surveyed state education agencies in the 50 states to identify the steps they are taking to support implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

***While nearly every state is pursuing more ambitious implementation strategies than they have for previous, state-specific standards, New York has among the most, if not the most, ambitious effort underway to support Common Core implementation.***

New York has taken a particularly robust approach to supporting implementation of the standards, zeroing in on the tools and supports that directly impact classroom teaching and learning statewide. More specifically, New York State has:

- Developed high-quality curricular and supplemental materials for voluntary use by districts and schools to align the state’s required high school courses to the Common Core college and career ready standards.
- Supported district and school use of high-quality curricular or instructional materials through the provision of proven processes, protocols, or exemplars.
- Collaborated with Massachusetts and Rhode Island to develop the “Tri State Rubric” for evaluating the quality of instructional materials and alignment their alignment to the Common Core. This tool enables educators to ensure that instructional materials they use are well aligned with the Common Core, and that they are not dependent on the claims of those who developed the material.

***New York is unique in the development of new CCSS-aligned materials.*** In 2010, New York State received approximately \$700M in Race to the Top funding, a large portion of which funded the state’s Common Core instructional materials work. In this work, the state held steadfast to the goal of creating CCSS-aligned instructional

materials that could be used by any district, school and teacher within New York to support the transition to the CCSS. The progress New York has made in the development of instructional materials in partnership with vendors is groundbreaking. In the development of these instructional materials, the state made a concerted effort to only partner with vendors that agreed to fully align the materials with the CCSS and license the materials with an open Creative Commons license, meaning that any educator both within New York and across states can utilize the resources and tailor them to meet his/her needs as long as the materials are properly cited and the open license is maintained.

All of the materials referenced above – including model curriculum and instructional units, professional development tools and materials, meeting materials and presentations for Network Team Institutes – are readily available on the EngageNY website, which is an important delivery vehicle for communicating these instructional resources to educators within New York. The breadth, depth and transparency of the materials on this site make have helped make it the go-to resources for educators implementing the Common Core standards throughout the country.

***New York is supporting teacher and principal access to effective professional learning opportunities in light of transition to the Common Core standards through a number of ways.*** At the heart of its effort are Network Teams and Network Team Equivalent (NTEs), which are 3- to 15-person teams located around the state who work in close partnership with districts and schools to build the capacity of New York State educators around the Regents Reform school-based initiatives. Each school district in New York State can receive support from its Network Team or NTE to help implement the State's education reforms. Taken together, the State Education Department's supports for professional development for teachers and principals include:

- A coordinated agency-wide plan and calendar for training and support aligned to CCSS/CCR standards.

- Statewide professional learning communities or other structures to provide ongoing support to local educators.
- Regional or local statewide professional learning communities or other structures to provide ongoing support to teachers and principals.
- Regional centers (BOCES) that providing training and support aligned to CCSS standards.
- Guidance or criteria for use of federal funds (e.g. in local Title I or Title II plans) to support high-quality professional learning aligned to CCSS standards

***New York has established quality control/feedback loops to evaluate and help strengthen the impact of training and support – and seems to be doing more robust than many other states.***

The New York State Education Department requires districts to conduct a self-assessment of quality, consistency and rigor of college and career-ready course materials, using the Tri-State Rubric. To our knowledge, no other state is making as extensive use of this tool to promote consistent quality in the instructional materials used in classrooms throughout the state. It does this by building the capacity of local educators to be discerning consumers, not by mandating the materials they will use. The State also reviews these attributes as part of on-site visits, using the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness process. The State has also been conducting targeted monitoring of Title I LEAs. LEAs have also conducted self-assessments of their progress in implementing the CCSS. In addition, the State Education Department is working with an independent research group to administer a statewide feedback survey assessing CCSS implementation progress.

***Notwithstanding these ambitious efforts, implementation of the common Core will neither be quick nor easy.*** Classroom level implementation will be uneven within and among local school districts, depending upon the capacity of their teaching force and school leaders. In some cases, the instructional shifts will be an



extension of current practices, while in others implementing the Common Core will require a change of practices, and change of instructional materials, and a change in expectations. The full effects of the Common Core won't be seen until an entire cohort of students, from kindergarten through high school graduation, has been effectively exposed to Common Core teaching.

While changing classroom instruction must always be at the heart of Common Core implementation efforts, in order to have an effective approach to improving teaching and learning statewide, these efforts must be situated in a coherent policy context that also addresses:

- High school graduation requirements, in order to ensure that all students are required to take courses that deliver the standards. For New York State this means paying particular attention to ensuring that course requirements address all of the college and career-ready math standards.
- Preparation of teachers and school leaders.
- Availability of data and data systems that support continuous improvement, including data from diagnostic assessments, formative assessments and other forms of student work.
- Accountability at the state, district, school and educator level, based on college and career ready standards.
- Ongoing support for the use of high quality instructional materials and tools.

### **ALIGNED ASSESSMENTS ESSENTIAL**

Aligned summative assessments – those that measure student growth and proficiency and provide data to evaluate educator effectiveness and hold schools and school systems accountable for result – are essential. It is indeed true that what gets measured gets taught, and so it is essential for state summative assessments to be well aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

New York has taken two steps in this direction. It has developed and begun to implement its own Common Core assessments for Mathematics and English Language Arts, starting this past school year with assessments for grades 3-8. New York has been a pioneer. It is one of the first states to implement new assessments designed to be aligned to the Common Core, an important step to support Common Core implementation in the classroom. As you know – and as expected – the results show that students and schools in New York State have some considerable distance to go to prepare all students for college and career. Far fewer students demonstrated proficiency on this test than on previous state assessments, reflecting the increased rigor of the Common Core standards, and providing a new baseline from which to judge progress each year.

It has also been a founding member of the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC), one of two multi-state consortia working to develop Common Core aligned assessments. New York, along with other strong reform-oriented states such as Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maryland, Ohio, Illinois, Louisiana and Tennessee. These assessments will be field tested later this school year, and available for implementation for the 2014-15 School Year.

**The PARCC assessments will be of comparable rigor to the New York assessments, and will offer a number of advantages over the New York test:**

***Comparability with other states.*** The PARCC assessments will enable New York to compare performance and progress with other states administering the same assessment. This will allow policymakers, taxpayers and educators to better evaluate the relative effectiveness of New York’s reforms, and to learn best from the strategies and practices in other states.

***Careful alignment to the Common Core State Standards.*** While some state tests drive instruction (“teaching to the test”) the PARCC assessment is driven by the instructional shifts in the Common Core standards, so that the vision of instruction

drives assessment. The PARCC development process prioritized understanding the Standards and high quality instruction first. To ensure that the assessment will be based on a rich model of instruction aligned with the CCSS, the PARCC Model Content Frameworks for educators were developed based on the Standards before the assessment blueprints were designed. The Model Content Frameworks were developed through a state-led process led by mathematics and ELA/literacy content experts in PARCC member states, including teachers, higher education representatives, and members of the Common Core State Standards writing team. The Frameworks highlight key elements of excellent instruction aligned with the CCSS, and in turn, informed the assessment blueprint design.

As a result, PARCC assessments will assess the Common Core with uncommon fidelity. In regards to the mathematics assessments, this means PARCC will include:

*Problems worth doing:* Multi-step problems, conceptual questions, applications to real world problems will be common, as in an excellent classroom.

*Focus:* Instead of randomly sampling a mile-wide array of topics, PARCC assessments will have a strong focus where the standards themselves focus. This will reinforce the concept of “going deep” rather than simply “covering topics.”

In regards to the ELA/Literacy assessments, this means PARCC will include:

*Texts worth reading:* The assessments will use authentic texts worthy of study and that are motivating and engaging to read, in contrast with the artificially produced or commissioned passages often found on tests.

*Questions worth answering, including*

- Sequences of questions that draw students into deeper encounters with texts rather than sets of random questions of varying quality.
- Items that allow students to demonstrate what they know, rather than what they don't know, by providing items that allow for partial credit.
- Items that allow for expression of divergent thinking.

***Technology-based assessments.*** Whereas the state test is a pencil- and paper-assessment, the PARCC assessments are designed to be delivered via technology (though pencil- and paper versions will be available for several years). This has several advantages, including faster scoring and reporting of results, while the end-of-year tests can actually be administered close to the end of the school year. Technology-enhanced items are computerized test forms that typically incorporate properties such as digital media and multimodal representations of information; interactive components such as student-operated navigational tools, tutorials, and simulations; and the capability to capture digitally the student’s test responses and other task-relevant interactive behaviors. In short, technology based assessments can measure aspects of the Common Core that pencil and paper tests can’t.

***Validation of college- and career-ready indicators across multiple states.*** The PARCC high school assessments will be validated as indicators of readiness to enter and succeed in credit-bearing courses. The necessary studies will be done in partnership with higher education systems in each PARCC state, and the result will be a common indicator of college readiness across participating states. This means that students who do well on the PARCC suite of high school assessments (end-of-course exams in Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II, as well as 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade ELA/Literacy exams) will be told they are ready to take credit-bearing courses, without remediation. It also means that the college-ready determination will be portable – accepted by public institutions in multiple states, not just a student’s home state.