

spotlight

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GOODBYE, GRAMMAR

N.C.'s Common Core-based English tests disregard grammar, spelling, mechanics, and usage

KEY FACTS:

- **Contrary to the Common Core State Standards themselves, Common Core-based tests developed and released by the NC Department of Public Instruction include relatively few English language questions and no traditional grammar, spelling, mechanics, or usage questions.**

- **Despite expectations that teachers spend equal amounts of time on nonfiction (“informational”) and literary texts, informational text questions outnumber literary texts in five of the six end-of-grade exams evaluated.**

- **Although withdrawal from the Common Core is the preferable course of action, state legislators and the members of the State Board of Education can and should ensure that the state adopts a state testing program that places a greater emphasis on grammar, spelling, mechanics, and usage.**

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While our state's reading performance has shown incremental improvement in recent years, North Carolina's public school students continue to register disappointing results on rigorous reading assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). According to the 2011 NAEP reading results (the latest available), 26 states had a significantly higher eighth-grade reading score than North Carolina. Only 10 states and the District of Columbia had a significantly lower score than our state.¹

State education leaders recognize that reading instruction in North Carolina's public schools is inadequate. After the release of the 2011 NAEP reading and mathematics results, Superintendent of Public Instruction June Atkinson acknowledged that North Carolina's public schools "continue to face challenges in improving reading performance."² Although education officials and researchers have not identified the various factors that perpetuate these challenges, state public school officials advanced a solution – adoption of the Common Core State Standards in English language arts.

Superintendent Atkinson and her colleagues argued that the 2010 adoption of the Common Core State Standards in reading "will give us the tools to help more students move into the Proficient and Advanced achievement levels."³ She claimed that the Common Core Standards would produce students who are skilled in synthesis, analysis, critical thinking, and both written and spoken communications.⁴ While proponents of the Common Core State Standards promise that the new standards will reintroduce these fundamental skills and concepts into classroom instruction, others are skeptical that the Common Core standards will live up to these lofty promises.⁵

Genre and grammar in the age of Common Core testing

Currently, two federally funded testing consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), are developing a series of common tests for states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. Both consortia anticipate rolling out common assessment systems in time for the start of the 2014-15 school year.

In the meanwhile, North Carolina's public school students will be assessed using state-developed English and math tests. These Common Core-based tests serve as placeholders until the consortia tests are released to participating states. Tests in these subjects are aligned with the Common Core standards in K-12 English language arts and mathematics, which the NC State Board of Education adopted in 2010.⁶

In early 2013, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) released sample Common Core-based tests including end-of-grade English and math exams for students in grades 3 through 8; science tests for fifth- and eighth-grade students; and end-of-course tests for Algebra, English II, and Biology. State education officials explained the purpose of the release.

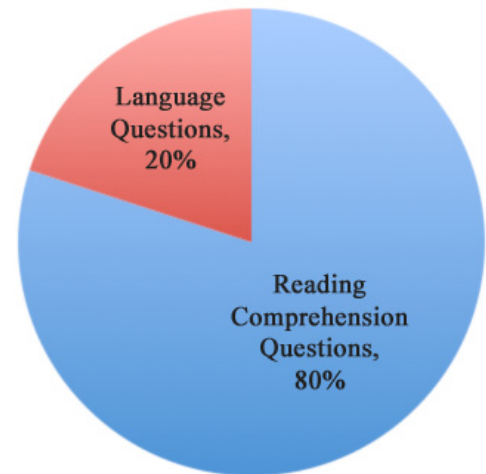
Released test forms may be used by school systems to help acquaint students with valuable test taking strategies in summative assessment situations. These strategies may include managing time, following directions, understanding reading selections, and thinking through how to select the correct answer. Released test forms may be used by parents and the general public in gaining a greater understanding of how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Mathematics and the Essential Standards for Science are measured.⁷

Common Core State Standards have begun to transform the way our public schools teach and assess English and math. North Carolinians should welcome the opportunity to examine these tests because they display the priorities and values of those who created them, namely the NC Department of Public Instruction.

The English language arts tests developed by the NC DPI focus on two main areas – language and reading comprehension. Of the two areas, the tests place an extraordinary emphasis on reading comprehension and contain

relatively few language questions. The percentage of language questions ranges from 14 percent in the fifth-grade test to 23 percent in the seventh- and eighth-grade tests. On average, 20 percent of the questions are classified as language questions, while 80 percent focus on reading comprehension (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of test questions by type, Grades 3–8 average



Language questions: Grammar and usage neglected

Although reading comprehension is critical, it is worrisome that only a small percentage of questions on North Carolina’s Common Core-based tests ask students to evaluate the use of language. It is even more alarming that the tests include no English language grammar, spelling, mechanics, or usage questions.

The few language questions that appear on the sample tests focus on evaluating words in the context of reading passages.⁸ Dr. Tammy Howard, Director of Accountability Operations for NC DPI, explains, “There is not an assessment of ‘grammar’ or the language standards in isolation, the standards require students to evaluate words in context. Language Standards will be assessed within the context of reading passages.” Yet, evaluating “words in context” is not the same as assessing appropriate grammar and usage. Rather, it involves the process of finding and evaluating context clues in a text.

For example, fifth-grade students are asked to decipher the meaning of the phrase “These jaws work like a pair of pliers” in the informational text titled “Plier Jaws and Sipper Tongues.” Similarly, another language question for the same passage requires students to determine the meaning of the word “coiled.” Indeed, nearly all test questions classified as language questions across grade levels focus on the meaning of words within the context of a story. There are no standalone questions about grammar, spelling, parts of speech, and the like.

Interestingly, this decision reflects the preferences of the test writers and developers that work with and for the NC Department of Public Instruction, not the Common Core Standards. Indeed, the Common Core English standards clearly require teachers to teach grammar and usage. According to one guide to the new English language arts standards, “Unlike the vast majority of language arts standards published over the past 50 years, the new Common Core State Standards reflect a revitalized emphasis on grammar, placing it on par with listening, speaking, reading, and writing.”⁹ Teachers in all grades are directed to ensure that students master the conventions of standard English grammar and usage.¹⁰ Although many aspects of the Common Core English language arts standards are objectionable, the standards outline a reasonable progression of language skills for students to master as they move from grade to grade (See Table 1).¹¹

Nevertheless, the broad exclusion of grammar, spelling, mechanics, and usage test questions mean that North Carolina’s English language arts teachers now have a disincentive to teach grammar and usage. Public school students may struggle to develop sound writing skills and habits as a result.

Reading comprehension questions: The “informational text” is king

Changing the balance of genres used in classroom instruction was one notable and widely expected shift in the English standards. Traditionally, English teachers spent considerably more time on the analysis of fiction via classical and contemporary literary works. The Common Core standards for English language arts require teachers to increase the use of so-called “informational texts” in classroom instruction. An informational text is defined as any of the

Table 1. English Language Arts Standards: Language Progressive Skills

Standard	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grades 9-10	Grades 11-12
L.3.1f. Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.3.a. Choose words and phrases for effect.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.3.3a. Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.4.1g. Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., to/too/two; there/their).		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.4.3a. Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.		✓	✓	✓				
L.4.3b. Choose punctuation for effect.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.5.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb tense.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.5.2a. Use punctuation to separate items in a series.			✓	✓	✓	✓		
L.6.1c. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in pronoun number and person.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.6.1d. Recognize and correct vague pronouns (i.e., ones with unclear or ambiguous antecedents).			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.6.1e. Recognize variations from standard English in their own and others' writing and speaking, and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.6.2a. Use punctuation (commas, parentheses, dashes) to set off nonrestrictive/parenthetical elements.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.6.3a. Vary sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
L.6.3b. Maintain consistency in style and tone.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
L.7.1c. Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.					✓	✓	✓	✓
L.7.3a. Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.					✓	✓	✓	✓
L.8.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood.						✓	✓	✓
L.9–10.1a. Use parallel structure.							✓	✓

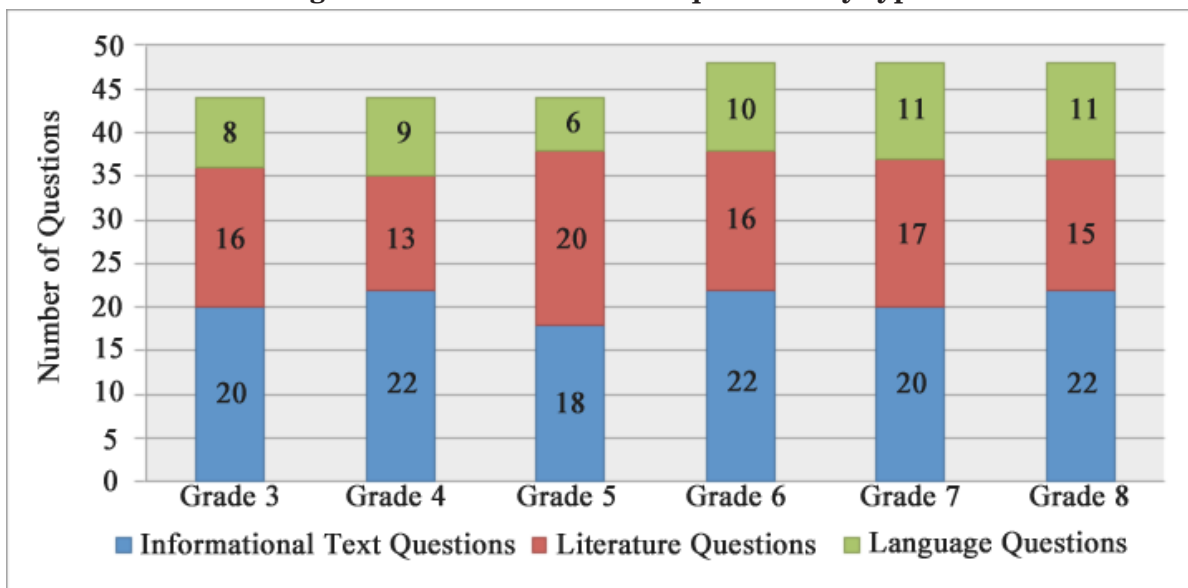
following types of documents: biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics.¹²

According to state education officials, the “expected balance for teaching is 50% for informational text and 50% for literary text.”¹³ Despite this requirement, North Carolina’s Common Core-based tests clearly favor informational texts. The number of passages on the tests is evenly divided between the two genres, but students are asked to answer a plurality of questions about informational texts on all but one end-of-grade English test (See Figure 2). Simply put, North Carolina’s Common Core-based tests measure students’ understanding of nonfiction writing at the expense of literary texts.

There are two reasons why the authors of the Common Core Standards, as well as the states that have adopted the standards, require a balanced treatment of fiction and nonfiction. First, they reason that the more that teachers use informational texts, the greater the opportunities they will have to introduce or enhance interdisciplinary instruction.

Common Core standards exist for English language arts and mathematics only, but both require children to “read,

Figure 2. Distribution of test questions by type



write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science.”¹⁴ North Carolina’s English tests have reading passages that touch on various topics, but scientific subjects are the most popular (See Table 2). At least one science passage is included in each elementary and middle school English test, with the exception of the eighth-grade assessment.

At first glance, this is simply an effort to bridge the disciplinary divide. While some incidental learning may occur, most English teachers have no expertise in social studies or science, for example. As a result, many English teachers will be unable to explain the information in the text adequately or connect it to current or past coursework in the subject area. This defeats the purpose of incorporating the text in the first place.

Second, proponents of Common Core claim that the shift will produce “career and college ready” high school graduates. In a recently published Pioneer Institute white paper, “How Common Core’s ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk,” Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky point out that there is no evidence that replacing literary passages with nonfiction texts will produce public school graduates that are better prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce.¹⁵ They conclude, “Common Core’s standards for English language arts, their organization, and their division, in effect, make it unlikely that American students will study a meaningful range of culturally and

Table 3. Informational texts in North Carolina’s Common Core-based test

Grade	Title 1	Subject 1	Title 2	Subject 2	Title 3	Subject 3
Grade 3	“Camels”	Science	“Masters of Verse”	English	“Echoes...Echoes... Echoes... Echoes...”	Science
Grade 4	“Pet’s Best Friend”	Science	“You’re a Poet, Now Let Them Know It”	English	Excerpt from “On the Bus with Joanna Cole: A Creative Autobiography”	English
Grade 5	“Will You Drive an Electric Car One Day?”	Science	“Plier Jaws and Sipper Tongues”	Science	“Dynamic Duo”	Science
Grade 6	“Gustave Eiffel, Architect of the Eiffel Tower”	Social Studies	“Silk’s Superpowers”	Science	“Be a Fit Kid”	Health
Grade 7	“On This Day: Krazy George Henderson Leads First Crowd Wave”	Sports	“From Marbles to Machines”	Social Studies	“The Hottest Soup in New York”	Science
Grade 8	“Padre Island National Seashore, Texas”	Social Studies	“Queen’s English”	English	“Splashy River Town”	Social Studies

historically significant literary works in high school and learn something about their own literary tradition before graduation.”¹⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

Withdrawal from the Common Core is the preferable course of action. However, a provision in Senate Bill 361: The Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013 would be a reasonable and welcome safeguard against high cost and/or low quality tests. The provision would require the State Board of Education to obtain approval from the legislature to purchase and implement standardized tests that are linked to the Common Core State Standards. Senate Bill 361 would mandate,

Notwithstanding the provisions of G.S.115C-174.11(c), the State Board of Education shall report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee prior to the purchase and implementation of a new assessment instrument to assess student achievement on the Common Core State Standards, including the Common Core Smarter Balance Consortium Assessments. The State Board shall not purchase such an assessment instrument without the enactment of legislation by the General Assembly authorizing the purchase.¹⁷

Unfortunately, it does not address two immediate problems. First, the state is now using placeholder tests that were developed by the NC Department of Public Instruction and not the testing consortia. Second, legislators do not know enough about the Common Core State Standards or educational assessment to make an informed decision about the implementation of a statewide testing program.

At minimum, the problems referenced above necessitate action by the NC State Board of Education. Legislators should request that the State Board of Education, its staff, or an appointed advisory board conduct an objective and comprehensive evaluation of the state’s existing Common Core-based tests. Similarly, a legislative study commission consisting of experts, legislators, parents, and teachers would be a step in the right direction. Regrettably, advisory boards and commissions are a necessary, but not sufficient, means of ensuring that North Carolina’s public school system has the best testing program in the nation.

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End notes

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress, "NAEP State Comparisons," nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons.
2. NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), "NC NAEP Math Scores Show State's Students Above The National Average In Mathematics, At The National Average In Reading" News Releases 2011-12, November 1, 2011, dpi.state.nc.us/newsroom/news/2011-12/20111101-01.
3. *Ibid.*
4. June Atkinson, "What Does the Common Core Mean for NC?" State Superintendent's Blog, February 7, 2013, dpi.state.nc.us/statesuperintendent/blog/2013/20130207.
5. See, for example, John Hood, "Standards Don't Make the Grade," August 24, 2012, johnlocke.org/news_columns/display_jhcolumns.html?id=9428.
6. Terry Stoops, "35 Questions about Common Core: Answers for North Carolinians," John Locke Foundation Spotlight Report, April 10, 2013, johnlocke.org/research/show/spotlights/284.
7. NC DPI, Accountability Services, "Released Forms: End-of-Grade ELA/Reading and Math Released Forms," ncpublicschools.org/accountability/testing/releasedforms.
8. Tammy Howard, "ELA Assessment Updates," NC DPI K-12 English Language Arts Wiki, elacss.ncdpi.wikispaces.net/Assessments.
9. Roberta Stathis and Patrice Gotsch, "Grammar, the Common Core State Standards, and Grammar Gallery," The Teacher Writing Center, SG Consulting, November 2011, teacherwritingcenter.org/common_core_essay_111611.pdf.
10. Common Core State Standards Initiative, "English Language Arts Standards: Language: Introduction for K-5," corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/introduction-for-k-5.
11. Of course, the implementation process often undermines the "best laid plans" or intentions. It is impossible to know for sure whether North Carolina's elementary and English language arts teachers are making an earnest effort to provide public school students a solid foundation in standard grammar and usage. Nevertheless, the standards adopted by the NC State Board of Education require them to do so, and there have been no reports of school or district-wide revolts against the Common Core English standards.
12. "Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading K-5," livebinders.com/media/get/Mzc1NTU5OA==, p. 1.
13. NC DPI, "The ELA Scoop: Informational Text Edition," NC DPI K-12 English Language Arts Wiki, December 2012, p. 2, elacss.ncdpi.wikispaces.net/Newsletters.
14. Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Myths vs. Facts," corestandards.org/resources/myths-vs-facts.
15. Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky, "How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk," Pioneer Institute, White Paper No. 89, September 2012.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
17. North Carolina General Assembly, "Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013 [Edition 2]," March 20, 2013, ncleg.net/gascripts/BillLookup/BillLookup.pl?Session=2013&BillID=s361.