

# National Standards Don't Make the Grade

April 2010 through 2013

Various Pioneer Institute White Papers



**Center for  
School Reform**

## Executive Summary

- When President Obama unveiled his “Race to the Top” (RttT) initiative in 2009, the idea was to award \$4.35 billion in federal grant money to states to replicate policies that boosted student achievement. That quickly changed and the federal money was instead used to persuade states to adopt administration-backed nationalized K-12 English and math standards and tests.
- Had the Obama administration been interested in policies with a proven record of improving students’ academic performance, it would have looked to Massachusetts. In the early 1990s, Massachusetts was an above average but unremarkable performer on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and SATs. After enactment of the Bay State’s landmark 1993 education reform law, SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. In 2005, Massachusetts students became the first state ever to score best in the nation in all four categories on the NAEP’s fourth and eighth grade reading and math assessments. The next three times the tests were administered, in 2007, 2009 and 2011, they repeated the feat.
- While American students as a whole lag their international peers, the 2007 Trends in International Math and Science Study showed Massachusetts students to be competitive with top-performing nations like Japan, Korea, and Singapore. (The Bay State’s eighth graders tied for first in the world in science.)
- There is, unfortunately, little in common between what Massachusetts did and what the U.S. Department of Education is trying to advance.
  - Massachusetts’ success was built upon a relentless focus on academics, specifically on literacy, math, and the liberal arts. Common Core emphasizes experiential, skills-based learning while reducing the amount of classic literature, poetry, and drama taught in English classes. Its more vocational bent includes far greater emphasis on jargon-laden “informational text” extracts, and it supports analyzing texts shorn of historical context and background knowledge.
  - The impact on English classrooms in Massachusetts, which adopted Common Core in 2010, has been to reduce the amount of classical literature studied by more than half. Goodbye Charles Dickens, Edith Wharton, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*.
  - In math, consider the view of Stanford University Emeritus Professor of Mathematics James Milgram, the only academic mathematician on Common Core’s validation committee. (He refused to sign off on the final draft of the national standards.) He describes the standards as having “extremely serious failings,” reflecting “very low expectations,” and ultimately leaving American students one year behind their international peers by fifth grade and two years behind by seventh grade.
  - One major practical effect is that American students will not get to Algebra I in eighth grade, which is critical if our students are to be college-ready in mathematics. Another is the insistence on using an experimental non-Euclidian approach to teaching geometry—an approach that has never been successfully implemented at the middle and high school levels anywhere.
- Rather than learn from leading states like Massachusetts, Common Core draws from the so-called “21st century skills” movement, which elevates soft skills like global awareness, media literacy, cross-cultural flexibility and adaptability, and creativity to equal footing with academic content. This less academic approach has, in fact, been road tested in places like Connecticut and West Virginia. Predictably, the results have been dismal.



**PIONEER INSTITUTE**  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH