

Sandra Stotsky responds to Fordham's "response" to the "counter-manifesto"
May 12, 2011

While Fordham claims it will address the counter-manifesto seriously, the opening sentence suggests that the main purpose of its response is to position itself and continue its dissemination of Newspeak. To accuse "conservative luminaries" of conveying "half-truths, mischaracterizations, and straw men" is to dismiss the five points in the counter-manifesto, backed by evidence where possible. I begin with Point #2 first.

2. There is no consistent evidence that a national curriculum leads to high academic achievement.

Fordham's reply seems to be: most state curricula were incoherent, therefore, a national approach to standards, curriculum and assessment will be better. This is a non-sequitur. As we pointed out, most countries have national standards or a national curriculum but do not have high achievement. Why should a set of high school-exit standards developed mainly by test developers and testing experts produce better results in this country than what we had before? Especially when we haven't changed the qualifications of our teacher corps, something that did happen in Massachusetts after 2000 with the development of more demanding licensure tests and content-standards driven preparation programs. If authentic "college-ready" standards were desired, we would have asked academic experts and knowledgeable high school teachers in those subjects to develop them. But we didn't. Why?

If higher achievement for all was desired, why weren't Common Core's math standards benchmarked to those in Singapore or S. Korea? Without any transparency by the two testing consortia about who is directing the production of their sample curriculum units, etc., and the test items, why should anyone think a national approach will be better? At least the current "hodgepodge" has allowed knowledgeable secondary math teachers to use the old Dolciani textbooks hidden in their bottom drawers.

#3. The national standards on which the administration is planning to base a national curriculum are inadequate. Everyone knows Common Core's math and ELA standards are not "excellent," as Fordham describe them, possibly thinking that it can intimidate English scholars and mathematicians, scientists, engineers, and mathematically literate parents if it repeats they are "excellent" loudly and often enough. Fordham doesn't even try to defend the adjective because all the favorable reviews in this country were done by organizations that had received Gates money (e.g., Achieve, Fordham). On the other hand, the counter-manifesto cited reviews by independent reviewers. **Why doesn't Fordham ask several groups of university mathematicians, scientists, and engineers in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea (for example) to evaluate Common Core's math standards and compare them with their own? This is a dare. Any takers? AFT or Fordham? I buy the drinks if they say Common Core's math standards are equal to theirs. Try the Alberta or British Columbia Department of Education for experts to evaluate Common Core's ELA standards.**

#4. There is no body of evidence for a "best" design for curriculum sequences in any subject. #5. There is no evidence to justify a single high school curriculum for all students.

Researchers know there is no best sequence for high school math or even science. The best tests at the high school level, as almost all experts agree, are end-of-course tests. But are these being developed? We do not know because there is no transparency in what the testing consortia are doing. And, despite

Fordham's pretense at cautions, how can they avoid shaping schools' curricular and instructional decisions, when that is what models and guidelines are for? Fordham's response completely ducks the transparency issue, which I say more about below from a personal perspective.

#1. If I am to be charged with "central planning," Fordham needs a better understanding of state government. The Massachusetts Department of Education didn't engage in "top-down control of curriculum and pedagogy," which is why, for example, the now dead ELA standards were almost universally liked by reading and English teachers (only 27 teachers in the whole state bothered to answer a survey sent by the Department the year before its board of education adopted Common Core). They knew that their professional autonomy in matters of both curriculum and instruction was respected.

What the Massachusetts Department of Education did do was elaborate (as it was supposed to do) on the provisions in the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, written mainly by Tom Birmingham, Senate President, and Mark Roosevelt, House Education Chair--two extremely able legislators who knew what they wanted--increased achievement for all students, more academically competent teachers, and accountability for state funding. That Act was the key to everything that happened. And it was approved by both the Senate and the Legislature after many hearings and negotiations, and by the Governor. Everything the MADoE did to implement what our legislators had voted for had to be out in the open--who our advisors were, what the public feedback to public drafts were, how and why we made the decisions we did. That civic process is what has been missing from everything that has taken place with the development of Common Core's standards and with what the testing consortia are doing because they have been allowed to act outside the framework of self-government in this country.

If I am indeed a "conservative" luminary, that doesn't say much for "liberal" or "progressive" luminaries. My (and others') work in Massachusetts led to consistent evidence of gains in reading, mathematics, and science, according to independent national and international tests, for ALL students. On the other hand, neither Fordham nor Gates nor Achieve nor the Shanker Institute (much as I admired Al Shanker) has produced anything independently judged to be visibly effective in raising student achievement.

Now for some specific advice from me.

1. Congress should provide funding for Massachusetts and Minnesota, as well as the country as a whole, to participate in the next two or three TIMSS tests. We need to participate in international PISA tests that assess the content of the school curriculum, not the skills used by adults in daily life (as in PISA).
2. Congress needs to mandate continuation of existing NAEP tests for the next ten years or so, with state-level results reported at least every two years. Congress should re-authorize ESEA with the proviso that schools receiving Title I funds show an increase in numbers and percentages in achievement at the high school level in every performance category except "below basic," disaggregated only by gender.
3. Congress needs to appropriate funds for the development of a variety of high school curricula, as do other countries, and allow students to choose the kind of high school curriculum they want to pursue.