

Moving Forward for Georgia's Students Joint Op-Ed on Georgia's Education Standards

As educators and leaders of Georgia's teacher organizations we have listened carefully to the ongoing discussion about education standards, including Georgia's CCGPS standards for mathematics and English language arts, as it has occurred in constituencies across the state and at the General Assembly in Atlanta. We have found that despite the well-intentioned reasoning behind the discussion, it has often rested on a key misconception about the difference between standards and instruction. We hope to bring clarity to this distinction and to provide some insight from the educator's perspective on criteria that standards should meet in Georgia.

Standards are statements that define expectations that all students should meet. Standards define specific content or learning outcomes that are expected of students at different grade levels and in different disciplines. They provide a common destination for students and a common direction for teachers. Instruction, however, is a set of activities or lessons that help students reach those desired outcomes. While our State Board of Education sets standards in Georgia, local school districts hold the responsibility for translating statewide standards into sequences of daily classroom instruction that will guide students toward mastery of the standards. Administrators and teachers in each district across Georgia make such instructional decisions based on student needs, community resources, and professional expertise. A teacher in metro Atlanta may, for a variety of reasons, take a different approach to help her students meet a particular standard than will a teacher in Southwest Georgia.

Understanding the difference between standards and instruction is key to successfully navigating the current discussion. Often the criticisms we hear directed towards the use of common standards actually involve instructional decisions—strategies and lessons developed or selected by districts or teachers to help students master a standard. Some of these criticisms point to a need for better communication about the nature of teaching and learning, while others call for careful reconsideration of instructional practices. In all cases, it is critical to remember that standards provide a foundation and structure for instruction but do not prescribe particular instructional activities. Both aspects of education—standards and instruction—are important and deserve attention.

Turning back to the main focus of the current discussion, we join Georgia's business leaders, military officials, university faculty, and many other stakeholders in the belief that Georgia must provide rigorous and accessible learning expectations that will prepare Georgia's students for college and career success and to compete with their national and international peers. Beyond setting high expectations for our students, we believe that education standards in Georgia should meet two additional criteria.

First and foremost, the development, adoption, or revision of standards should value the voices of professional educators in Georgia while also taking account of other relevant stakeholders and guiding information. Key stakeholders in Georgia, including parents and other citizens, should absolutely have a voice in a nuanced conversation about our education system, but this issue is too important to be reduced to political talking points. At the same time, we must build on existing knowledge, whether that knowledge comes from education research, collaborative

efforts among states to develop curriculum frameworks, or lessons learned from standards implementation in other states.

Second, our standards should support, but not dictate, effective classroom instruction. Standards that are informed by both disciplinary content knowledge and research on how students learn can help Georgia's teachers open a wide door of opportunity for our students to have equal access to learning. This access can be further supported when standards in various disciplines build on and reinforce one another. In the end though, Georgia's standards should continue to allow local flexibility in the development and implementation of classroom instruction. Decisions about how to help students in a particular community reach the targets set by our standards are presently, and should continue to be, made at the district and school level through collaboration among educators and community stakeholders.

The Common Core State Standards, as they were adopted in Georgia's CCGPS for mathematics and English language arts, are an important step toward meeting the criteria outlined above, and these standards are doing more to support college and career readiness for all students than any previous standards approved in our state. While we recognize that adjustments may be needed to improve the implementation of the CCGPS, we hope to see Georgia continue to move forward by incorporating the latest research-based approaches in education.

As our state moves ahead to consider adjustments to recently adopted standards or to consider the revision of longer-standing guidelines, we believe that a clear understanding of the difference between standards and instruction and the criteria outlined above should be applied in a good faith effort to make decisions that will best serve the students of our state. While it is critical that Georgia's citizens come to a common understanding regarding our education standards, it is equally critical that we give attention to providing our schools and teachers the support they need to help our students achieve these standards. We hope to take a lead role in moving our state forward in these efforts.

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Signed:

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Dr. Eddie Bennett is executive director of the Georgia Council for the Social Studies and has worked more than 37 years as a Georgia educator. In 2011, he retired as the middle and high school social studies supervisor in the Cobb County School District.

Dan Funsch is the 2012-2014 President of the Georgia Council of Teachers of Mathematics. He is in his 40th year of teaching high school mathematics. He currently teaches at the Alleluia Community School in Augusta, GA.

Dr. Donna Governor is a classroom with teacher with more than 30 years experience in the classroom at all levels, K-12. She is President of the Georgia Science Teachers Association, holds a PhD in Science Education from UGA, and is a 2007 Presidential Awardee for Excellence in Science Education.

Bejanae Kareem, an educator in high need schools for over a decade, has been instrumental in early childhood to post-secondary classrooms. Ms. Kareem currently serves as the Executive Board President of the Georgia STEAM Alliance Network and is an advocate for projects that inspire and help those underserved.

Dr. Julie Rucker is a classroom teacher with over 20 years of experience teaching English and Journalism. She has an Ed.D. in Curriculum Studies with an emphasis in Literacy from Georgia Southern University. She is President of the Georgia Council of Teachers of English and is this year's Tift County School System Teacher of the Year.