

Open Letter to State Legislative and Executive Leadership: Common Core State Standards, Honor, and Senator Luther Olsen

August 8, 2013

To: Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald
Assembly Speaker Robin Vos
Governor Scott Walker

Honorable Sirs:

On May 22nd of this year, people from across the state of Wisconsin packed a joint meeting of the Senate and Assembly Education Committees in a show of deep concern over this state's decision to implement Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As we have covered many of our concerns elsewhere, we will not belabor them here. However, we do firmly reiterate that CCSS was adopted without any significant consultation of Wisconsinites or their elected representatives—and minus any proper, thorough investigation.

We were initially hopeful when the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) adopted an amendment, offered by Rep. Dean Knudson, on CCSS provisions in the 2013-2015 Biennial Budget. While the amendment did nothing to prevent the continued rollout of English and math standards, it paused adoption of any further standards and was meant to ensure at least six hearings in order to gather further information on CCSS. Several of these hearings were to be held at various locations around the state, and would give the public a valuable opportunity to make their voices heard.

We have thus far been disappointed by an evident lack of action on these hearings. For that reason, we now feel compelled to address this fact and related matters with you publicly.

Hearing Delays Must Cease

Two months have now passed since the JFC amendment stipulating multiple hearings on CCSS. Ostensibly, the Joint Legislative Committee (JLC), tasked with holding several of these hearings, should have something on the calendar by now. Yet, instead of seeing action, we are receiving reports from inside the Capitol Building that the JLC co-chairs, Senator Luther Olsen and Representative Joan Ballweg, are running the clock in an effort to avoid holding the hearings at all. In fact, individuals who have called the offices of both co-chairs to inquire are being told that the amendment language was posed as a “request,” and that the JLC is actually under no obligation to hold the hearings.

Such behavior is unacceptable.

The people of Wisconsin have a right to learn the facts about CCSS. Those elected officials tasked with investigating the program have a duty to perform. We expect them to perform it in a responsible and timely fashion. Regardless of the language the JFC used, one would hope that the JLC co-chairs would want to do right by the people—particularly the children—of this great state. Allowing children, parents, teachers, and taxpayers to be subjected to uninvestigated educational standards is, quite simply, dereliction of duty. Dereliction of duty has consequences.

CCSS English and Math Standards Should Be Paused

The fact that no solid investigational hearings on CCSS have yet occurred has caused many to suggest that there will no longer be enough time to complete a thorough investigation of the program before school districts begin planning for the 2014-2015 academic year.

The fact that proper investigations have not been done means that school districts are increasingly committing themselves, their students, their teachers, and taxpayers to unknown outcomes and costs.

This fact is also unacceptable.

Testing against the standards will begin after 1 January 2014. The undersigned, along with thousands of equally concerned citizens across the state had counted on multiple hearings over the summer and early fall of this year in order to uncover the facts on CCSS. Such a timeline would have made it possible, if necessary, to halt the rollout of the English and math standards prior to the implementation of CCSS testing. That is no longer a likely scenario.

If the hearings cannot be completed in time, then the continuing rollout of CCSS English and math standards must be paused, pending further investigation. A pause, in fact, would be the only responsible action to ensure that, (1) the legislature is well informed, (2) the public has a chance to weigh in on these standards, and (3) the children of Wisconsin are well served.

Conflicts of Interest Must Not Be Permitted

Senator Luther Olsen currently serves as both the chair of the Senate Education Committee and co-chair of the JLC. Not only is the JLC tasked with holding at least three investigative hearings on CCSS; the Senate Education Committee is a logical avenue both for future investigations of CCSS and consideration of any legislation pertaining to these educational standards. All of this means that Senator Olsen is in a powerful position in relationship to how or whether CCSS will be considered at the legislative level.

While concerned by Senator Olsen's open bias in favor of CCSS, our concerns go far deeper. Senator Olsen actually has an apparent conflict of interest that should preclude him from chairing either of the two committees in question.

Senator Olsen is currently married to former Representative Joan Wade. Since 2001, Wade has served as the administrator for CESA 6, one of 12 regional, quasi-governmental entities responsible to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), the agency that unilaterally adopted CCSS in this state.

Moreover, CESA 6 is charged with facilitating the implementation of CCSS. As Agency Administrator, Wade commands significant salary for this work, which directly benefits Senator Olsen's household. Sen. Olsen thus has an apparent conflict of interest in matters relative to CCSS implementation.

CCSS doesn't just affect part of our public education system. If fully implemented, it will *be* our educational system. Senator Olsen's apparent conflict of interest currently mars two of the three legislative committees with the greatest power to conduct investigations into CCSS and/or consider legislative action pertinent to it. As a result of this situation, Wisconsinites will not be able to trust that Senator Olsen is able to rise above his own biases or that, under his leadership, the two committees in question are acting wholly in the interests of the people of this state.

We would thus urge Senator Olsen's reassignment to other committees in order to keep faith with the people of Wisconsin.

There are undoubtedly other areas and capacities in which Senator Olsen could lead, thereby resolving his apparent conflict of interest. We trust you to discover what those areas might be, to place Senator Olsen where he can be of service, but also—first and foremost—to ensure that the people of Wisconsin have every reason to trust their state government.

We thank you for your attention to the items above and look forward to your own leadership in helping to resolve them. With time now so short, and 2014 elections approaching, we know you will wish to do so quickly.

Most sincerely,

[the undersigned]

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