

NAACP NEWS

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Gloria J. Sweet, President



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Common Core State Standards Good for Teachers and Students

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Tennessee has a proud history of overcoming the challenges of providing a quality education to all but right now in Nashville, there's a political fight that could set our state back decades. Our leaders face a fundamental question: Are they going to raise expectations so that all Tennessee students have an equal opportunity to a world-class education?

Tennessee's history includes a protracted legal and political battle that resulted in our state being the first in the South to desegregate a public school when the "Clinton Twelve" started school at Clinton High back in 1956. That progress didn't happen overnight; it took a long and sometimes bloody battle in church pews, schoolyards, and courthouses to integrate and properly resource Tennessee schools.

Times have changed quite a bit, but a modern day tug-of-war in education is happening in the statehouse now that our legislative session is under way – over the Common Core State Standards. And once again, the futures of all students, especially minority and low-income students of all races, hang in the balance.

Three years after the state began implementing the standards, which hold all schools and districts to the same high standard of educating our children, some lawmakers have pre-filed a bill to stop the progress we've made and explore replacing it with something new.

Most people don't know what the Common Core State Standards are, so they're vulnerable to attacks from fringe elements with a political agenda that has little to do with educating Tennessee's young people.

So, what are these standards? The Common Core State Standards set clear and consistent expectations for what Tennessee public school students should know and be able to do. The standards define the critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing skills our children will need for college and the workforce. For instance, every student in Tennessee should be able to identify the theme of a story and summarize it by the end of 4th grade. It is up to the teachers and the principals how they create lesson plans that help students get there. But the expectation is high and it's the same for everyone.

The standards are popular with teachers and become more popular the longer teachers get to use them. The nation's governors and state superintendents of education showed leadership in calling for these consistent standards and worked closely with teachers and education experts to write them. Nationwide, more than two-thirds (69%) of teachers believe the standards will actually improve their classroom practice, and 65% agree that the standards will improve student learning.

The standards have the support of most of the state's leadership, including Governor Haslam, many legislators on both sides of the aisle in Nashville, the business community, and both of our organizations, the National Urban League and the NAACP. We support them because we know that, given the huge disparities in achievement for low-income students and students of color in Tennessee, having consistent, high, and achievable standards across the state can improve education for every child: rural or urban, rich or poor, White or Black.

And in only three years, we're already seeing good results. In 2013, our state led the nation in improvement in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a nationwide test acknowledged as the gold standard for what the nation's students know and can do. Last year, our state's average ACT scores made the biggest gains since it began testing students.

All of America's children deserve a 21st century education system that works for each and every one of them, and our nation's most vulnerable children deserve more than we've given them in the last 60 years. Our state has come a long way since Clinton High School integrated 59 years ago, but we have an obligation to prepare all Tennessee students for an ever-changing, more demanding world.

For parents, teachers, and people who care about educating our young people, supporting these standards is just common sense. That's why we must come together from across the state and tell the legislature loud and clear: leave the standards alone, and let our teachers do their jobs.

Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors.

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