

**TESTIMONY OF ANTONIA CORTESE
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BEFORE THE COMMISSION ON NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
AUGUST 31, 2006**

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission on No Child Left Behind. My name is Antonia Cortese, and I am the Executive Vice President for the American Federation of Teachers. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you today the quality of state standards in reading and math. The AFT released a 50-state report last month called “Smart Testing: Let’s Get It Right,” which analyzed states’ content standards and what we call “smart testing,” so this topic is a timely one for us. I’ve attached a copy of this report as an appendix to my testimony, because I draw heavily upon its findings.

State standards are public documents that are a primary source that teachers, parents, test developers, and the general public consult to understand what’s expected of students, from grade to grade and across subjects. These standards should drive what goes on in a standards-based educational system, including teaching and testing, so it’s important that they are strong, clear, specific, updated as appropriate, and widely circulated. I commend the commission for holding this hearing to focus in on these important documents.

The AFT shares your desire to ensure that all students are taught to clear, grade-specific, and rigorous state standards. I think we all can further agree that we also must ensure that state tests reflect these standards. Where there’s a mismatch between the content that’s expected, the content that’s taught, and the content that’s assessed—and

when the results are used to judge students, schools, and teachers—it's no wonder that frustration in schools runs high. At the end of the day, once such test results are posted, it's unclear what exactly they have measured or their validity in making the types of accountability determinations for which they are currently used. Thus, my comments today will address the standards as well as the extent to which states' assessments are testing these standards.

Since 1995, the AFT has tracked the development of state standards as well as the extent to which states' assessments draw from (or "align to") these standards. When the AFT looks at standards, we check for specific things: Are they detailed, explicit and firmly rooted in the content of the subject area—enough so as to lead to a common core curriculum? Does the standard contain particular content for each subject? For example, reading standards must cover reading basics (such as vocabulary skills) and reading comprehension (such as exposure to a variety of literary genres). And does the state articulate unique standards for every grade and subject?

I'd like to comment on the strength of the reading and math standards that are in play across states. AFT's "smart testing" report noted several positive changes from five years ago when we last looked at these standards in a really systematic way, which also was just as NCLB was coming on the scene. First, all but six states have developed standards in grades 3-8 in reading and math as required by NCLB. This is an increase from pre-NCLB years. Second, the standards that states have created are overall clearer and more specific than five years ago. Clarity and specificity are important features in articulating and aligning expectations for what should be taught, learned, and tested at each grade and subject. And third, 19 states have strong reading and math standards in

every grade tested for NCLB purposes. This is definitely marked progress from prior years.

However, we also found that these standards are not universally strong across states, subjects, and grades. Two-thirds of states lack strong standards in every grade and subject tested under NCLB and, thus, have more work to do in this domain. Overall, states' weakest standards are in reading. This has been the case since 1995. A big problem is that many states simply repeat the same reading standards from grade to grade, with 15 states parroting the standards in three or more grades. This means that these states cannot articulate the differences in what a student should know and be able to do in the area of reading, at specific grades: for example, in one state, reading expectations for third graders were identical to reading expectations for eighth graders. This is not nearly specific enough to build a common core curriculum and guide teachers as to what students should be taught.

In addition, standards at the high school level, in all subjects, are problematic. Many states have not developed grade-by-grade or course-by-course standards at this level; instead, they have "clustered" these standards, meaning they've created a single standard that is intended to serve multiple grade levels: 20 states cluster their high school reading standards, 22 cluster their high school math standards, and 21 cluster their high school science standards. This, too, is inadequate in helping teachers know what to teach, test developers know what to test, and students and parents to know what's expected at every grade level.

So, while we do see progress across states in terms of the development of content standards, we also see some key areas where many need to improve.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss an associated set of findings from our recent report—specifically, how states' standards relate to states' examinations. Eleven states have got it right in terms of having strong reading and math standards in every grade and tests that clearly match up with these standards. And three additional states are getting close: They have at least 75 percent of their tests aligning to strong standards. But in 21 states, not even half of the tests align with strong reading and math standards. These states have a lot of work to do in developing strong standards, linking their assessments to them, and clearly documenting this alignment.

I understand that the Commission is interested in what NAEP results reveal about the quality, consistency, and rigor of state standards. I am not aware of any publicly released 50-state study that compares NAEP's framework to states' content standards, although this may be a useful thing to research. Yes, there are several studies that have addressed the topic of proficiency standards, comparing the results of how students have scored on various state tests vs. how they fared on NAEP. But these don't give us information about the rigor of NAEP's content standards vs. states' content standards. And even comparing NAEP proficiency results across states can get confusing. NAEP may test students on certain content in grade 4 math, for instance, that in some states isn't expected until grade 5, and students' performance on NAEP will reflect these differences. As it currently stands, we don't know how states' content standards compare to NAEP's because, to my knowledge, no one has looked at this in a systematic way.

Here's the bottom line: We've got to ensure that children's academic performance is being judged by tests that match up to what the state has told teachers and parents it expects students to learn. Right now, this happens only about 50 percent of the

time and varies widely by which state you're in. State departments of education have got to do a better job at determining the content they expect to be taught at each and every grade, or course-by-course in high schools, and lining up that content with what they're testing.

AFT's report findings have several implications for NCLB. First and foremost, we need a study of state accountability systems—including standards, curriculum, and assessments—to ensure that the tests in use are of high quality. Such a review—perhaps conducted by the National Academy of Sciences—would help ensure that states and/or the testing companies they contract with are adhering to common, professional testing standards and that their tests actually reflect what their standards intend.

Second, NCLB should provide more opportunities for states to learn from one another about how to develop strong, grade-specific standards as well as curricula and assessments that are aligned to these standards. For instance, NCLB could offer grants for volunteer groups of states to develop common academic standards, curriculum, and tests. This would enable states to pool their resources and learn from one another about how to better articulate what students should know and be able to do at each grade level; it also would provide more consistency in the definition of proficiency and growth. Achieve, Inc. provides a useful model in the area of math, where some states have volunteered to participate in developing common standards and assessments. This is a good first step that we can learn from and build upon. This type of assistance is particularly urgent in the area of reading across all grades and in all subjects at the high school level. Some states are ahead in this domain and can help other states that are behind.

And third, to help all states get testing right and fulfill the goals of NCLB, Congress must go beyond the bare minimum required by the law and appropriate additional funding for state departments of education to develop quality content standards and assessment systems. NCLB should be funded at least at the level promised in the 2001 reauthorization.

Thank you again, Commission Members, for the chance to talk about these matters and to expand upon the findings of our recent report. I welcome any questions that members of the NCLB Commission may have in regard to my testimony.