

**Testimony of Michael Cohen**  
**President, Achieve Inc.**  
**To**  
**Commission on No Child Left Behind**  
**August 31, 2006**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and thank you for the work you are doing to define ways that Congress can improve NCLB when it is taken up for reauthorization.

I am particularly pleased to participate in this hearing that is focused on the quality and rigor of state standards and assessments. As you know, Achieve was founded by governors and business leaders a decade ago to help states address these very issues. I believe that Achieve's work over the past decade provides us with insights and experience that can be helpful in your deliberations.

**PROFICIENT ON STATE TESTS AND NAEP**

Most parents, educators and taxpayers presume that being proficient in reading and math depends on what a student knows, not the state in which he or she lives. However, when it comes to measuring student proficiency, geography matters a lot. In the vast majority of states there are significant differences between the percentage of students who score at the proficient level on state tests and the percent scoring proficient on state NAEP, a common national benchmark. "Proficient" means something different in every state.

These inconsistencies in state definitions of proficient probably have less to do with differences in state content standards, and more to do with differences in the content and cognitive demand of questions on state tests compared to NAEP and tests in other states.<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, some state tests contain many more easy items and fewer challenging items compared to tests from other states and to NAEP. Students who score proficient on these tests answer a large number of easy questions correctly, but not questions about more advanced content or that require more complex cognitive skills, for there but a few of these on the test. We have found that state tests are far less likely than NAEP to measure advanced content and more complex cognitive skills. Rather, the items on state tests are often heavily concentrated on less advanced topics and less challenging cognitive tasks. For example, in a comparative study of high school graduation tests in six states<sup>2</sup>, Achieve found that all but one state test emphasized pre-algebra over algebra or advanced algebra items, and that across the states the test questions overwhelming asked students to use routine procedures rather than the more complex skills of formulating problems, strategizing solutions or using advanced reasoning.

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<sup>1</sup> For the most part, state math and reading standards generally incorporate the same content. Where differences exist, they are most likely to reflect differences among states in the grade level in which certain content is included, rather than whether it is included at all

<sup>2</sup> *Do Graduation Tests Measure Up?: A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams.* Achieve, Inc. 2004

As a result, students often don't have an opportunity to demonstrate more advanced skills on state tests. To the extent that educators narrow instruction to focus on what they know to be on the test, rather than the broader skill set that is in the standards, students are less likely to receive instruction in, and acquire, more advanced skills. When asked to demonstrate these skills on NAEP they are less well equipped to do so. Even though they score well enough to perform at the proficient level on the state test, they are unable to score that well on NAEP.

Additional variation is introduced as a result of where each state sets the "cut score" on the test that corresponds to the "proficient" performance level. Each state sets its own standard, based on a mix of professional judgment about the test items that best reflect proficiency, as well as judgments about the proportion of students the state can tolerate below certain performance standards. Typically, the higher the stakes for the test, the greater is the pressure to lower the standard for proficient or passing.

More important than the inconsistency among state standards is the fact that state standards themselves are not aligned with the knowledge and skills students must have in order to succeed after they leave high school, particularly in postsecondary education and the workplace. Simply put, today's state standards – as well as the national standards developed in the late 1980's and early 1990's – reflect a *consensus* among subject matter experts about what would be desirable or even important for young people to learn. They are not the result of a careful analysis of the work young people will do when they complete k-12 education, and the knowledge and skills essential for postsecondary success. Further, state tests for high school students are significantly less rigorous than the skills needed for college and careers. For example, to pass the state high school graduation tests mentioned above, students are only required to demonstrate knowledge and skills that students in other countries with whom we compete generally learn in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Consequently many students in every state meet state standards, pass state tests, and complete state-required courses, only to require remedial courses once they enroll in college. They may have been *proficient*, but were obviously not *prepared*.

If NCLB is to be a vehicle for improving state standards and tests, both issues must be dealt with. To some, the answer is simple – federally developed or supported national standards and tests. While that is one approach, I want to offer another approach, one that builds on and helps sustain the leadership of many states to equip their young people with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills necessary for success in postsecondary education and careers. This is the work of Achieve's American Diploma Project Network and the Honors State Program of the National Governors Association, launched at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools.

## **LESSONS FROM THE AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT**

The American Diploma Project – a partnership of Achieve, the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation -- conducted a two year research study with postsecondary institutions and employers in five states to define the knowledge and skills in math and English language arts that high school graduates must have in order to



succeed in postsecondary education, and to have access to jobs that pay well and provide opportunities for upward mobility. Based on this study we produced a detailed and specific set of “college- and work-ready” benchmark expectations for the end of high school. We found that “ready for college” and “ready for work” mean the same thing, at least with respect to a core set of academic skills in mathematics, reading and communications that are essential for success in both worlds.

Achieve conducted additional research to compare state standards with the ADP benchmarks. We found that no more than a handful of states measured up. In fact, we found that *no* state had a system of standards, curriculum, graduation requirements and accountability that were well aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and work. This “expectations gap” -- between the knowledge and skills high school graduates need and what is required of them to earn a high school diploma -- is one of the reasons that 30% of first year college students require remediation, and why surveys of college faculty, employers and recent high school graduates themselves reveal that approximately 40% of recent high school graduates are unprepared for either college or work.

At the 2005 Summit Achieve, along with governors, state K-12, postsecondary and business leaders in thirteen states, launched the American Diploma Project Network, to help states committed to align high school standards, curriculum, assessment and accountability with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in postsecondary education and work. Now, there are twenty-five states in the ADP Network that collectively educate more than half of the public school students in the Nation.

Nearly all of these states have begun to define “college and work-ready” standards, by bringing together teams of postsecondary faculty, employers and k-12 educators to examine national research, state data, employer needs and the work actually done in college classrooms.

Achieve is helping teams from 17 states do their work. They are drawing heavily on the ADP benchmarks to begin with, are sharing their work along the way, and have committed to participate in a systematic external quality review of their standards including a comparison with the ADP benchmarks. This won’t guarantee consistency among the states, but the odds are high that there will be quite a bit. As important, this process guarantee a public and transparent external check on state standards, so state officials and educators will know how their own state standards related to the ADP benchmarks. This is a much different process than what occurred in the 1990’s, when virtually every state “based” their standards on national standards, with no independent verification.

The next 10 – 12 months will tell how much consistency there is among the resulting state standards, though the work to date suggests that there will be a very high degree of consistency among the state standards. The initial ADP research in five states showed clearly documented what common sense already tells us – the knowledge and skills

needed for success in the real world after high school are not dependent upon geography or the boundaries of government jurisdictions.

A number of states in the ADP Network have gone beyond consistent standards, to a *common assessment*. Nine states have spent the last year working together to develop a common end-of-course test in Algebra II. They recognized that as they increased course-taking requirements for high school graduation, end-of-course exams would be needed to ensure consistent content and rigor across Algebra II courses within each state. They recognized that by working together they could create a better test at a lower cost, faster than by working on their own. They wanted the opportunity to compare the performance of their students to those in other states, because the comparisons would help them gauge and speed up their progress. They recognized that they didn't each need their own Algebra II test because Algebra II courses ought to cover the same content regardless of the state in which it was taught. And, they recognized that by working together they would create and sustain the pressure to keep the standards and test rigorous, despite the forces in each state that tend to exert downward pressures on standards. Finally, they recognized that if sufficiently rigorous, an Algebra II test could help reduce remediation rates in college, by enabling postsecondary institutions to let high school students know if they are ready to do college level work, or need to make up skills deficiencies before enrolling.

Within the next several weeks they will issue an RFP to select a test developer, and expect to administer the test for the first time no later than Spring 2008. The procurement is designed in such a manner so that additional states can purchase the same test, now or in subsequent years. This will be only the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and by far the largest, effort by a group of states to develop common assessments.

These developments have great promise, though it is about a year too soon to tell if they will bring about a greater level of consistency in state standards and testing. But it is not too soon to identify the conditions that have made progress to date possible.

First, anchoring standards in the real world demands students will face after high school has brought an important degree of focus, rigor and consistency to the process. Focusing on the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in college and careers is a powerful source of upward pressure on state standards. The fact that employers and colleges operate in a national and global environment serves to create a high level of consistency across states. While there is still room for considerable collective judgment, the debates about standards in many states are different from debates many of us have grown accustomed to over the years. Conflicts among warring ideological camps in mathematics and English have largely been replaced by evidence-based debates about the advanced math skills really needed to succeed in credit-bearing general education courses compared with those needed to prepare students for the courses that will lead to STEM careers. Debates about the literature high school students should read take a back seat to ensuring that students also read complex informational texts and learn to write clear expository writing needed everyday in the workplace.

Second, the use of external benchmarks and an external review of state standards reinforce the features highlighted above. Further, when differences between state standards and the ADP benchmarks are identified, participants are forced to articulate the reasons for their judgment, making the process and results more transparent than many previous efforts.

Finally, the absence of federal funding or other involvement in this work has made it easier for states to participate, without the specter of federally controlled standards or tests complicating the political landscape.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND REAUTHORIZATION**

There are several steps the federal government can take through the reauthorization of NCLB that will help states improve preparation for postsecondary education and work, and increase consistency in state standards and tests at the same time. Briefly, these include:

- Through competitive grants, provide financial incentives to states to align high school standards, assessment, curriculum and graduation requirements with the demands of postsecondary education and work, and to align standard and tests in grades 3-8 with these high school standards. To provide adequate phase in time and to allow states to take different approaches, do not tie new tests to AYP.
- Provide financial and technical support to states to work together to develop and use common assessments.
- Provide financial and technical support to improve the quality and rigor of state tests, and ensure that states are not locked into using existing tests by AYP requirements.

Clearly one way to ensure a consistent, nationwide definition of “proficient” is for the federal government to support the development and implementation of national standards and tests. I am sure that others testifying before this Commission will elaborate on the various ways that can be done, and the pro’s and con’s of each. I’ve chosen not to recommend that approach, in part because I doubt the political will for it exists.

However, if the Commission chooses to recommend the creation of national standards and tests, it will be very important that:

- the standards in math and English for the end of high school to be aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and work and verified as such by postsecondary institutions and employers.
- grade-by-grade standards starting no later than grade 3 be vertically aligned with the end-of-high-school so as to provide a clear progress of knowledge and skills;
- the high school level tests in math and English be developed with the higher education community and be capable of providing information that can be used to place students into credit-bearing vs. remedial courses; and,
- test and cut scores for grades 3-8 also be vertically aligned with the high school level test, so that students who score “proficient” in elementary and middle school be on track to reach the proficient level when they complete high school.



Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I thank you for your attention and I look forward to any questions or comments you may have.