

An Open Letter to the Read-To-Lead Task Force

From Dan Gustafson, PhD

State Superintendent Evers, you appointed me to the Common Core Leadership Group. You charged that the Leadership Group would guide Wisconsin's implementation of new reading instruction standards developed by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

It is my understanding that I was asked to join the group with the express purpose of bringing different voices to the table. If anything, my experience with the group illustrates how very far we need to go in achieving a *transparent and reasoned* discussion about the reading crisis in Wisconsin.

[DPI Secretly Endorses Plan Created by Poor Performing CESA-7](#)

I have grave concerns about DPI's recent announcement that Wisconsin will follow CESA-7's approach to implementing the Common Core reading standards. DPI is proposing this will be the state's new model reading curriculum.

I can attest that there was *absolutely no consensus* reached in the Common Core group in support of CESA-7's approach. In point of fact, at the 27th of June Common Core meeting, CESA-7 representative Claire Wick refused to respond to even general questions about her program.

I pointed out that our group, the Common Core Leadership Group, had a right to know about how CESA-7 intended to implement the Common Core Standards. She denied this was the case, citing a "non-disclosure agreement."

The moderator of the discussion, DPI's Emilie Amundson, concurred that Claire didn't need to discuss the program further on the grounds that it was only a CESA-7 program. Our Common Core meeting occurred on the 27th of June. Only two weeks later, on July 14th, DPI released the following statement:

State Superintendent Evers formally adopted the Common Core State Standards in June 2010, making Wisconsin the first state in the country to adopt these rigorous, internationally benchmarked set of expectations for what students should know and are expected to do in English Language Arts and Mathematics. These standards guide both curriculum and assessment development at the state level. Significant work is now underway to determine how training will be advanced for these new standards, and **DPI is currently working with CESA 7 to develop a model curriculum aligned to the new standards.**

In glaring contrast to the deliberative process that went into creating the Common Core goals, Wisconsin is rushing to *implement* the goals without being willing to even show their program to their own panel of experts.

What Do We Know About Wisconsin/CESA-7's Model Curriculum?

As an outsider to DPI, I was only able to locate one piece of data regarding CESA-7's elementary school reading performance:

4TH GRADE READING SCORES, 2007-08 WKCE-CRT,
CESA-7 IS AMONG THE WORST PERFORMING DISTRICTS.
CESA-7 RANKED 10TH OF THE 12 WISCONSIN CESA'S.

What Claire did say about her philosophy and the CESA-7 program, before she decided to refuse further comment, was that she did not think significant changes were needed in reading instruction in Wisconsin, as “only three-percent” of children were struggling to read in the state. This is a strikingly low number, one that reflects an arbitrary cutoff for special education. Her view does not reflect the painful experience of the 67% of Wisconsin 4th graders who scored below proficient on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

As people in attendance at the meeting can attest, Claire also said that her approach was “not curriculum neutral” and she was taking a “strong stand” on how to teach reading. Again, when I pressed her on what these statements meant, she would only reference oblique whole language jargon, such as a belief in the principal of release from instruction. When I later asked her about finding a balance that included more phonics instruction, she said “too much emphasis” had been given to balanced literacy. After making her brief statements to the Common Core group, she said she had already disclosed too much, and refused to provide more details about the CESA-7 program.

Disregarding Research and Enormous Gains Made by other States, Wisconsin Continues to Stridently Support Whole Language

During the remainder of the day-long meeting on the 27th, I pressed the group to decide about a mechanism to achieve an expert consensus *grounded in research*. I suggested ways we could move beyond the clear differences that existed among us regarding how to assess and teach reading.

The end product of the meeting, however, was just a list of aspirational goals. We were told this would likely be the last meeting of the group. *There was no substantive discussion about implementation of the goals—even though this had been Superintendent Evers' primary mandate for the group.*

I can better understand now why Emilie kept steering the discussion back to aspirational goals. The backroom deal had already been made with Claire and other leaders of the Wisconsin State Reading Association (WSRA). It would have been inconvenient to tell me the truth.

WSRA continues to unapologetically champion a remarkably strident version of whole-language reading instruction. Please take a look at the advocacy section of their website. Their model of reading instruction has been abandoned through most the United States due to lack of research support. It is still alive and well in CESA-7, however.

Our State Motto is “Forward”

After years of failing to identify and recommend model curriculum by passing it off as an issue of local control, the DPI now purports to lead. Unfortunately, Superintendent Evers, you are now leading us backward.

Making CESA-7 your model curriculum is going to cause real harm. DPI is not only rashly and secretly endorsing what appears to be a radical version of whole language, but now school districts who have adopted research validated procedures, such as the Monroe School District, will feel themselves under pressure to fall in line with your recommended curriculum.

By all appearances, CESA-7’s program is absolutely out of keeping with new Federal laws addressing Response to Intervention and Wisconsin’s own Specific Learning Disability Rule. CESA-7’s program will not earn us Race to the Top funding. Most significantly, CESA-7’s approach is going to harm children.

In medicine we would call this malpractice. There is clear and compelling data supporting one set of interventions (Monroe), and another set of intervention that are counter-indicated (CESA-7). This is not a matter of opinion, or people taking sides. This is an empirical question. If you don’t have them already, I hope you will find trusted advisors who will rise above the WSRA obfuscation and just look at the data. It is my impression that you are moving fast and receiving poor advice.

I am mystified as to why, after years of making little headway on topics related to reading, DPI is now making major decisions at a breakneck pace. Is this an effort to circumvent the Read-To-Lead Task Force by instituting new policies before the group has finished its scheduled meetings? Superintendent Evers, why haven’t you shared anything about the CESA-7 curriculum with them? Have you already made your decision, or are you prepared to show the Read-To-Lead that there is a deliberative process underway to find a true model curriculum?

There are senior leaders at DPI who recognize that the reading-related input DPI has received has been substantially unbalanced. For example, there were about five senior

WSRA members present at the Common Core meetings, meaning that I was substantially outnumbered. While ultimately unsuccessful due to logistics, an 11th hour effort was made to add researchers and leadership members from the Wisconsin Reading Coalition to the Common Core group.

The Leadership Group could achieve what you asked of it, which is to thoughtfully guide implementation of the Common Core. I am still willing to work with you on this goal.

State Superintendent Evers, I assume that you asked me to be a member of the Leadership Group in good faith, and will be disappointed to learn of what actually transpired with the group. You may have the false impression that CESA-7's approach was vetted at your Common Core Leadership Group. Lastly, and most importantly, I trust you have every desire to see beyond destructive politics and find a way to protect the welfare of the children of Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

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