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Subject: Open Letter from Patricia Levesque: Accountability Drives Results

Friends,

With students now out for the summer and states, local school districts and schools now preparing for the coming academic year, many in the education reform community are focusing on the rigorous new tests that will be in place next spring.

In many states across the nation, these new assessments will measure students' mastery of the skills and knowledge outlined in the Common Core State Standards. **We believe that if properly implemented, these high-quality math and English language arts standards will raise the academic bar in American classrooms, ensuring children are ready for life after high school, whether that involves enrolling in college or pursuing a career.**

But it's important everyone understand the limits of standards. By themselves they do not make kids smarter. Nor do they make teachers better, or require that school districts be more flexible, responsive and efficient.

In fact, Dr. Eric Hanushek, one of the nation's most respected education researchers, fears that Common Core may distract us from pursuing basic school reforms that have been proven to accomplish those goals. "As history clearly indicates," he says, "simply calling for students to know more is not the same as ensuring they will learn more."

Consider California. It had perhaps the best language arts and math standards in the nation, regarded as equal to or even superior to those in Common Core. If standards reflected achievement, California students would be consistent leaders in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results.

Instead, California is a consistent under-performer.

Florida, on the other hand, has become a national leader in NAEP learning gains. In comparison to California, Florida has adopted a wide slate of education reforms, including an aggressive K-3 literacy policy, an A-F scale for grading schools, rewards for success and sanctions for failure, tenure reforms, digital learning opportunities, and a host of choice options, including charter schools and scholarship programs for low-income students or those with learning disabilities.

School improvement requires multiple approaches, centered on accountability for adults and school choice for parents. Simply put, the system responds differently when student achievement is regarded as mandatory rather than optional, and when parents have alternatives to failing neighborhood schools.

California lacks such reforms, in effect turning its standards into a wish list.

We just saw this in the historic *Vergara v. California* ruling. The state grants teachers tenure far too soon, in only 18 months, and maintains ironclad job protections regardless of job performance. Incompetent teachers stay on the job, with evidence revealing that they are most likely to wind up in low-income schools.

We can't measure the specific impact of this, but can point out a glaring statistic. In the 2013 NAEP results, low-income fourth graders in California ranked near the bottom nationally in reading. They are almost two grade levels behind their peers in Florida (218 – 200 NAEP points). The difference is that Florida has a third-grade retention policy for functionally illiterate children, which is backed by intensive remediation. The state's A-F school grading formula also takes into account gains made by the lowest performing quartile of students.

Accountability drives results.

This is what is concerning about calls from the teachers' unions and even the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of our donors, for across-the-board moratoriums on accountability. The stated intent is to smooth the transition into the Common Core standards. But states that have implemented sound accountability policies do not need moratoriums. They are ready to move forward and maximize the potential of the new standards.

In my experience, **pressing pause means stopping forward momentum.** And when that happens, things can go backwards. There can be changes in leadership and political will. States that press pause likely will find it difficult to restart accountability policies.

Given the longstanding antipathy that unions have had toward accountability, it's hard to imagine them suddenly embracing the concept a few years from now simply because they ostensibly support higher standards.

Standards cannot be used as a strategy to loosen accountability. **If testing data reveals that children aren't learning, or that certain teachers are not effective, how can we simply put that information on hold?** Given what we learned in *Vergara v. California*, the losers in this equation will be our most disadvantaged students.

One of the most compelling arguments for higher standards is the belief that if we hold all children to high expectations, we can close the achievement gap. But moratoriums on accountability could well have the opposite effect.

Lastly, let's be clear about accountability. We do not believe high-stakes decisions should be made about children or teachers based on one test given one day. There should be multiple measures to assess students and teachers, and multiple opportunities to achieve success.

Adopting high standards is easy. Backing them up with the reforms required to ensure they will be met is not. It requires taking on powerful special interests. It often entails telling people what they don't want to hear about the quality of their schools and the academic achievement of their children.

The solution for states is simple. Be thoughtful, but move forward. Make children the focus of your education systems. Make their ability to read and write, to multiply fractions and solve for X, the sole criteria for judging success. And if you do, then the Common Core standards and rigorous new assessments adopted by states will be a success.

Patricia Levesque
Chief Executive Officer
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