



# STATE OF UTAH

GARY R. HERBERT  
GOVERNOR

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SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH  
84114-2220

SPENCER J. COX  
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

May 4, 2016

Members of the Utah State Board of Education:

Over the past several years, I have heard numerous concerns regarding Utah's 2010 implementation of Common Core academic standards. We have seen improvements over time, but the controversy has only intensified. While there is clearly a great deal of misinformation being disseminated on this issue, there are legitimate concerns that I share with those opposed to the Common Core. As I have listened, it has become clear to me that the conflict, discord, and divisiveness associated with these standards are not helping our students.

We have had these existing standards, with modifications, in place for the past six years. We have learned what works and what does not. I believe it is an appropriate time to fix those areas that have not worked and improve on those that do. With the recent repeal of No Child Left Behind, we also have substantially more flexibility to chart our own course for improved educational outcomes for Utah students. Today I am asking the State Board of Education to consider implementing uniquely Utah standards, moving beyond the Common Core to a system that is tailored specifically to the needs of our state.

I know that as governor I do not have the authority to change academic standards. The Utah State Constitution clearly says that authority is left solely to the independently elected State Board of Education (Article X, Section 3). As you engage in this process, I hope three main principles will guide your actions:

- 1) Maintaining high academic standards in all subject areas for all of our students;
- 2) Keeping the federal government out of education decisions in Utah; and
- 3) Preserving local control of curriculum, testing, data collection, and instructional practices.

Just as important as the actual educational standards, is the process by which we arrive at those standards. This should be a Utah process with public comment and discourse. Utahns from across the state must know that their voices will be heard. While it is the prerogative of the State Board of Education to determine this process, I encourage you to invite parents, teachers, and other members of the general public to submit alternative standards or suggestions for improvement to these standards.

It is critical that we not repeat past mistakes made during the 2010 implementation of the Common Core standards. If we want to succeed, it is imperative that we have adequate resources available for curriculum and teacher training. I commit to work with the legislature to secure this funding to ensure the successful implementation of any new academic standards. We must also listen to the concerns and complaints of teachers and administrators who truly understand the needs and difficulties in their classrooms. Even more important, we must work with parents and students to understand what works and what can be improved.

I know that local school boards and charter schools—not the State School Board—are responsible for curriculum, textbooks, and instructional methods used in our neighborhood schools. As governor, I will continue to support this important principle of local control as we all understand the shortcomings of a one-size-fits-all approach. It is imperative that any new standards are flexible enough to allow a wide variety of curricular decisions by individual school districts.

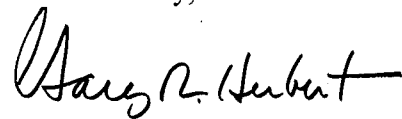
In addition to concerns about Common Core standards, I have also listened to complaints regarding testing in our schools. As you know, the new SAGE assessment is a distinctly Utah test, developed by the Utah State Office of Education and reviewed by Utah teachers, administrators, and parents. While technology and assessment can help complement the important work of our teachers, I worry that we are spending too much of our time testing. I believe that our teachers need more freedom to be creative in the classroom in order to maximize the time students spend learning, not the time they spend taking tests.

With your support this past legislative session, we made two key changes on this front. First, we eliminated the consideration of SAGE testing results when evaluating our local teachers (H.B. 201). In addition, I signed another bill, H.B. 200, that eliminates the SAGE testing requirement for the 11th grade. To combat this growing concern of over-testing, I am requesting the State Board of Education consider a plan that will eliminate the SAGE testing mandate for all high school students. In conjunction with this, I am requesting a thorough review of the effectiveness of SAGE testing for all remaining grade levels. With your endorsement of this plan, I will ask the Utah Legislature to consider legislation making this change, even if possible in the upcoming special session.

Let me conclude by stating that I understand education is a very passionate issue—and it should be. The future of our state and nation depends in a very real way on the education of our children. More than ever, we are competing in a global marketplace and must raise the level of educational achievement in our state. We should not be afraid of high standards or hard tests. We can and should expect more of our students, more of our schools, more of our parents, more of our legislature, and more of our governor.

I have eleven grandchildren in Utah public schools. I have seen firsthand the frustration they and their parents have had over an assignment they did not understand and that teachers struggled to teach. I know these changes will not silence all of the critics, but I do hope that we can move past these divisive issues and continue working together to provide a world-class education that is second to none for our children and grandchildren.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary R. Herbert". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "G".

Gary R. Herbert  
Governor