

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2009, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) began work on the Common Core State Standards initiative – a state-led effort to establish a shared set of academic standards for English language arts and mathematics.

The Common Core State Standards were intended to differ from most current standards in several ways. First of all, they aspire to define college and career-ready expectations for all students. They further attempt to express both rigorous content and how to apply that content; focus on fewer concepts; and are internationally-benchmarked so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society.

The final standards were released in 2010 and within two years were adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.); Texas, Alaska, Nebraska and Virginia were the four exceptions.¹ “Adoption” means simply that states agree to accept 100 percent of the standards and to assess student progress toward meeting them within three years. There is no entity for Common Core enforcement or oversight. Some states are having second thoughts; as of this writing, three former Common Core states – Indiana, Oklahoma and South Carolina – have repealed their use as state standards.

While the standards are available to all states, they are not federal. Rather, they were developed by associations representing governors and state education leaders, funded with private money, and provided free of charge to every state that chooses to participate. No federal dollars or officials were involved in the drafting process. It should also be noted that the Common Core State Standards have neither been debated nor endorsed by Congress.

However, even though there was no federal involvement in developing the Common Core, the effort has been promoted by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as part of the over-arching goal to produce high school graduates who are both college- and career-ready. The Education Department further provided incentives to states for adopting the Common Core in the competition for Race to the Top (RTTT) grants and in granting No Child Left Behind waivers.

The federal government has also taken a major role in Common Core implementation by funding five national assessment consortia—two for general education, two for alternative assessments for special

¹ Minnesota adopted only the English language arts standards, not the math.

education students, and one for English language learners. The consortia are charged with developing assessments aligned to the standards. They are supported with \$417 million in federal Race to the Top grant funds.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) recognizes the importance of rigorous academic standards to ensure that students enrolled in our public schools are competitive in the global society. States and school districts likewise see the benefit to students of having rigorous standards, strong curricula aligned with those standards, and valid, reliable systems of assessments that fairly and accurately reflect the performance of students, schools and school districts. There are different views, however, about how to achieve this effectively. Some believe public schools would best be served through national standards like the Common Core. At the same time, there are others who believe that standards are rightfully left to states to develop individually or collectively by groups of states.

ISSUES RELATED TO IMPLEMENTATION

Diverse views about the desirability of national standards notwithstanding, the Common Core are a reality for the vast majority of school districts. Now comes the hard work: putting the new standards in place in local school districts. In most states, the Common Core will be more rigorous than the standards they replace.² Implementing them will, therefore, require a lot of planning, effort and resources, including:

- an extensive professional development plan for local administrators and teachers that includes collaboration time for aligning instruction to new standards;
- communications outreach to students, parents, businesses and the community at large to explain why schools are making the shift and what it will mean for students;
- new assessments, curriculum and instructional materials;
- supports for students who need extra instruction, especially English language learners and students with disabilities;
- sufficient technology to support computer-administered assessments and state-of-the-art, secure student data systems; and
- upgrades to university teacher preparation programs.

As if aligning all of these pieces wasn't already a big job, states and districts are operating under a very tight deadline. The first Common Core assessments are scheduled to be rolled out in the 2014-15 school year in most states. Indeed, a few pioneers led by Kentucky and New York have already begun. Ultimately, local school districts will be responsible for the standards' success, but they cannot do the job alone. State resources and support, coordinated with the input of local school boards and superintendents, will be vitally important for effective Common Core implementation.

COMMON CORE ASSESSMENTS

As mentioned, the U.S. Department of Education awarded large grants to state consortia to develop assessments aligned to the Common Core. Two major consortia have \$346 million between them to develop "next generation" assessments: the now 21-state SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)

² Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *The State of State Standards -- and the Common Core -- in 2010*.

including 12 states and D.C. Other consortia are at work on alternative assessments for special needs students: Dynamic Learning Maps, and the National Center and State Collaborative. The fifth consortium, ASSETS, is working on developing an on-line tool for English language learners.

The consortia are charged with designing assessments that will ask students to demonstrate their abilities with higher level skills as well as content knowledge. States will be offered both *summative* assessments, or end-of-year tests, as well as *formative* assessments, which are administered throughout the year and used primarily for diagnostic purposes. In addition, the assessments are expected to incorporate principles of universal design for learning. Rich assessments like these tend to be more costly than typical standardized multiple-choice tests. But it is hoped that economies of scale will lower the overall costs for states.

PARCC and SBAC Common Core assessment consortia: An overview

What do they have in common?

- are intended to assess higher order thinking at grades 3-8 and high school
- will measure both student growth and proficiency
- will be administered online in order to provide rapid feedback
- will include both summative assessments for accountability and formative assessments to monitor student progress
- will provide aligned resources, for example, model lessons, diagnostic tools and professional development modules

How do they differ?

- both will be administered by computer; only SBAC will be 'computer-adaptive, meaning the test items will adjust to individual test-takers' skill level
- SBAC will have a comprehensive high school test; PARCC will provide end-of-course high school tests
- SBAC is budgeted to translate assessments into five languages, one of which will be Spanish

How are PARCC & SBAC collaborating?

- working toward scoring systems allowing for comparisons between the two
- developing protocols for Artificial Intelligent scoring
- examining interoperable technology infrastructure
- working toward same deadlines, 2014-15

NSBA POSITION

NSBA recognizes that the federal government has an important role to play in helping states and school districts provide all students with a strong public education. However, the role must be one of partnership and support -- not only in terms of funding for those students with the greatest needs, but also in serving as a clearinghouse to share and promote ideas and best practices to help educators fulfill their mission.

NSBA supports high academic standards, including Common Core standards, that are voluntarily adopted by states with local school board input and free from federal direction, federal mandates, funding conditions or coercion. Local school boards are responsible for the implementation of any new academic standards such as common core standards, which include locally approved instruction and materials in a manner that reflects community needs. Therefore, NSBA urges states to provide financial and technical support to enable school districts to implement, in an effective and timely manner, voluntarily adopted rigorous standards, including the Common Core standards.

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Learn more about the Common Core State Standards at: www.centerforpubliceducation.org/commoncore.

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