Common Core Standards: After Adoption, What Comes Next?

Background

Within six months of the release of the Common Core Standards on June 2, 2010, they have been officially adopted by 40 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. In addition, Idaho, Maine, and Washington have each provisionally adopted the standards, pending official adoption by their legislatures, and several more states will be voting on adoption in 2011. This means that more than 75 percent of the nation’s student population will be educated to the Common Core Standards within the next few years. Given this shift, it is imperative that state education officials, educators, administrators, and the community are educated about the Common Standards and what they mean for teaching and learning—and testing. Policymakers and educators should also understand the basics of the Common Core Initiative itself.

Because 80 percent of the states have adopted the Common Core Standards, the issues of governance and sustainability will be a major factor in the success and longevity of the standards. At NASBE’s 2010 Annual Conference in Salt Lake City, Dane Linn and Chris Minnich from National Governor’s Association and (NGA) and the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), respectively, spoke to state board members about this critical issue. The two organizations are proposing creation of an independent entity that “will not take any federal money” to be solely in charge of ongoing review and revision of the standards. “This group should not be focused on assessments, should not be focused on curriculum, should not be responsible for teacher training—it will only be responsible for the standards,” Linn said.1 Oversight of the proposed entity will include representatives from primary stakeholder groups such as governors, state board of education members, state and local superintendents, legislators, teachers, and school administrators.

Even as the Common Core governance entity begins to take shape, states have started planning and outreach for the eventual phase-in of the standards, with the 2014-2015 school year the final deadline. Some states have adopted an implementation plan; others have incorporated their plan into the state board’s strategic action plan, and many other plans are still in development. Regardless of where a state is in its implementation process, it is important that all the major education stakeholder groups address the question of “What comes next?” in light of the role their members play.

Issues to Consider

The Common Core Standards are like a beacon that marks the destination that schools and students are supposed to reach. However, by themselves standards have little power and without proper systems and policies in place the Initiative could become weak or even derail during implementation. Below are some issues for state policymakers to consider when addressing Common Core implementation and the overall development of a strong, aligned system that follows policy to practice.

* Continuity after the 2010 Elections: While the results of nearly all the 2010 midterm elections are known, the impact the leadership changes will have on education has yet to be determined. Only four states did not have an election at the state level, and majority of states had a change of leadership in two or more state education positions (i.e., governor, state education chief, or state board of education), along with significant changes in many state legislatures.2 Political leaders may arrive with agendas and visions that are drastically different from their predecessors, even if they are of the same party.

Because of their inherent stability, state boards of education will play a vital role throughout this transition in setting and maintaining the vision for the education system. Between elections and new appointments, NASBE estimates that 50 to 60 state board of education seats will turn over during the period from November 2010 to the end of January 2011, or 7 to 9 percent of all state board members.
This is in contrast to the 58 percent of governors and about one-third of chief state school officers who will be new to their jobs in 2011. Because of the unprecedented number of incoming elected officials, it is important for state boards to meet with these officials to share the board’s education vision and engage in open dialogue on the issues, challenges, and concerns facing their state during implementation.

But with more elections coming every two years—and with continued hard economic times likely to foment more political unrest—states could have different governors and/or state education chiefs than those who were present at the inception of the standards or through their full adoption, implementation, and assessment. Again, this makes it all the more important that state boards of education create strong, effective, and aligned policies that can maintain their integrity through transitions among state education leadership and ensure an effective implementation of the Common Core Standards.

**Policy Audits:** The most important action a state board should take while transitioning to the Common Core Standards is to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all the policies, procedures, and requirements currently in place that relate to the standards. The results of a policy audit will provide the state board with valuable information on what policies need to be created or modified to best fit the new standards.

Several policy areas will be especially sensitive to the new standards. For example, high school graduation requirements may need to be modified to reflect the new skills and knowledge expressed in the standards. Additionally, the relationship between state assessments and high school graduation may need to be reexamined to reflect the new target outcomes and goals of the assessment consortia now working in most states (see “Assessments” below).

The requirements for teacher licensure and certification are another area that should undergo a comprehensive evaluation. Many states require content specialization as part of teacher certification to meet the “highly qualified” provision under the No Child Left Behind Act. Given that portions of science and history are integrated throughout the standards, a high school math or English teacher may no longer be considered “highly qualified” with only a degree in their particular subjects. Likewise, an elementary special education teacher may need additional training or support to help their students reach these rigorous standards. The U.S. Department of Education hopes to revamp the notion of a highly qualified teacher in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by expanding the definition to indicate that a highly qualified teacher is also a highly effective teacher. It remains to be seen, however, how and if the definition of a highly qualified and effective teacher will be defined by Congress in the reauthorization legislation. Given the uncertainty, state boards can use their collective voice to continue pushing for changes in the legislation to improve alignment with the Common Core Standards—and to stress the urgency for reauthorizing ESEA in general. Meanwhile these definitions and characteristics may need revisions to be in compliance with the current legislation.

Completing an inventory of current standards and policies is arguably the most important action a state board can take to ensure an effective, efficient, and smooth transition to the Common Core Standards.

**Assessments:** The U.S. Department of Education selected the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) as grantees work with states to develop student assessment systems aligned to a common set of academic standards. These assessment systems are to be fully implemented in the 2014-2015 school year. The Smarter Balanced Consortium will feature computer adaptive testing to give teachers more comprehensive, accurate, and timely information on how well a student understands a given topic. The assessment system will be conducted completely online and will include teacher input and involvement in both the development and scoring of the standards. The PARCC consortia will feature a computer-based testing system, but will also include some human intelligence in scoring the assessments. PARCC’s main focus is on college and career readiness and post-secondary success.

As the assessment groups develop their assessment and governance systems, there are several areas state boards should begin to explore, including 1) alignment of high school graduation requirements with the goals and results of the new assessments and 2) comparability between the two consortia.

Representatives of both consortia have stated that the new assessments will test critical thinking and performance-based skills in addition to content knowledge, just as the Common Core Standards do. Most high school graduation requirements are based on course completion, which may emphasize content knowledge over mastery and application. With new assessments emphasizing skills along with content, state boards could look into adding performance-based skills as a requirement for graduation. In addition, if end-of-year exams determine the type of diploma a student receives, it is important to consider what might need to be modified to best fit the diploma qualifications. Changing the graduation requirements would also add an incentive to incorporate these performance and critical thinking skills into instruction, thereby serving as another lever for ensuring students graduate college and career ready.
Comparability between the two assessment organizations is a crucial factor in the assessment discussion. Currently, the proficiency levels and rigor of standards and assessments differ from state to state, making it difficult to compare achievement results or know if performance levels are “world class.” NAEP provides some solution to this problem, but not at the student, school or, for the most part, district level. The common standards will also improve this situation, but what is needed to provide an accurate picture of achievement across the country are comparable assessments based on common standards. Representatives of the two assessment consortia have stated that they working together to ensure that their systems are comparable. Nevertheless, state boards should continue to advocate—and insist upon—comparability among the different systems.

★ Professional Development: Professional development for current and incoming educators and administrators is a critical element to the success of the Common Core Standards. To fit the current standards and accountability requirements under state laws and No Child Left Behind, teachers have had to narrow their instructional strategies to cover all the material. The incoming standards however, allow for more flexibility and call for more in-depth knowledge and application of the content. Given the new freedom and flexibility for educators to teach to a deeper level of knowledge, it is imperative that educators understand the new standards, have the knowledge and skills to teach to that level of comprehension, and know how to access the materials and resources needed to help their students reach these standards.

The new assessments will make up a second area of educational practice to incorporate into professional development. Educators need to have a deep understanding of how the new assessment systems will be structured, what types of knowledge and skills will be required of their students, and how the results will be used by the state, district, and school. In addition, the consortia intend the new assessments to help inform instruction; therefore, additional training for teachers to effectively use the data and information to modify and adjust their instruction to best fit the needs of students is required.

State boards of education can create both policies and incentives that mandate or recommend what type, how often, and the quality of professional development current and incoming educators will need in order to successfully teach to the standards.

★ Teacher Preparation and Licensure: One challenge that has not been noted in many of the discussions around the Common Core Initiative is how teacher preparation institutions will modify their programs to align with the Common Core Standards and the timeframe in which this will occur. Given the 2014-2015 school year deadline for implementation, there are four years to modify or completely restructure a teacher preparation program. This presents a number of challenges, however, particularly for students currently in a teacher preparation program. Students, for example, who entered their first year of a four- to five-year teacher preparation program in the fall of 2009 or 2010 will be first or second year teachers in the 2014-2015 academic year. As states shift from their current standards and assessments, these future teachers may not get proper training to teach to the Common Core or have a fundamental understanding of the assessment consortia and their testing systems. In addition, teacher candidates who receive their training in a state that did not adopt the new standards, or received their training from an alternative certification program, may not receive any training about the Common Core at all. Therefore, they—and their students—could be at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts. As a result, it is important to have programs and professional development opportunities in place to help first-year teachers adjust to the new standards.

To facilitate changes during this transition period, state boards can use their program approval authority to ensure that all teacher education programs in the state include the Common Core Standards and new assessments in their training. They can also make decisions on the characteristics of a highly qualified teacher and the state’s certification requirements. Unpacking the standards and determining the skills and knowledge a teacher must demonstrate to teach to the standards is a critical step in this process. Defining teacher readiness and reflecting this in the teacher licensure and certification system can place added pressure and accountability on teacher preparation institutions to upgrade their programs to prepare teacher candidates to teach to the Common Core Standards.

★ Digitally Accessible Materials: With a plethora of educational resources available electronically, state boards can work to expand online accessibility to instructional materials and to advocate true alignment of packaged materials to the Common Core Standards.

A growing number of states are expanding their definitions and policies around textbooks to include digital content and open source information. California, Florida, and Texas, for example, now have policies that allow textbooks to be available digitally instead of requiring print based copies in all classrooms. Arizona, Iowa, Tennessee, and Virginia have followed similar paths by expanding the definition of a textbook to include digital content. These initiatives started both as a cost saving measure and also as a pathway to expand online and digital learning. California education officials, for instance, hope this can end the textbook shortage across the state and significantly reduce the amount of
money spend on textbooks, which is currently around $400 million. Florida leaders also reported at NASBE’s 2010 annual conference that the open source policies allow online academic institutions greater flexibility and ease of operation. With common academic standards in 40 states, alongside advances in virtual publishing, many believe the time is ripe for sets of textbooks and instructional materials, aligned with the standards, to be available online. Consequently, it is important for state boards to examine current policies around textbooks and open source information to ensure that these materials are accessible and that schools are permitted to use them.

★ Packaged Curriculums: State boards can also explore how digital resources and open sourcing could play a role in newly developed curriculum frameworks. Sharing materials and expertise electronically can significantly reduce costs of developing curriculums for each state. Two national organizations have begun the process of developing aligned curriculums and tools to the standards.

The Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and operated by the Common Core organization, was created to develop a curriculum and set of instructional tools aligned with the Common Core Standards in English language arts only. It is to be made available free of charge. Additionally, the Joint Task Force on Common Core State Standards, made up of representatives from the Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators, the Association of State Supervisors of Mathematics, the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, was created to facilitate implementation of the mathematics standards into the classroom, including development of a toolkit for implementation.

Given the abundance of resources and products that are or will soon be available for educators to use in the classroom, state boards should be wary when it comes to claims that materials “meet the new standards” and should come together with their state education agencies and partners to demand that materials are of high quality and truly aligned with the Common Core Standards.

With states facing continuing budget crises, incoming officials with different opinions on education, and other challenges, it is imperative that state boards use their collective wisdom, experience, and authority to align policies and practice, to command better quality materials and supports from outside sources, and set the vision of what comes next for each state after implementation.

Resources

★ Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Website: www.smarterbalanced.org/

References


All web links in the Resources and References sections were active as of December 7, 2010.

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