As the Common Core Standards in mathematics and English language arts are being released—and state boards of education begin the work of reviewing and adopting the standards—it may be useful to view these standards in the larger context of education reform, both in terms of how the country arrived at this point and in terms of the key issues to consider in the adoption process.

The History Behind the Initiative

While the Common Core Initiative has been garnering headlines for the past year, efforts to create national standards actually span the past three decades. The first catalyst for this effort was the 1983 release of the Department of Education’s *A Nation at Risk*, which sounded the alarm that our students were falling behind those in other countries. The notion of operating in a global economy was first forming around this time, and the report detailed the ways in which American students were not being prepared to operate in the global workforce. The message was clear: if the nation did not change the way its students were educated, the United States would not remain as competitive as it had been in the international marketplace, and American’s standard of living would suffer.¹

In response to the challenge first raised in the report, President George H.W. Bush held a national education summit in 1989 with the governors to discuss strengthening the U.S. education system. Two themes emerged from this summit: 1) there was bipartisan support for national education goals; and 2) the federal government’s primary role in education should be to provide financial support to states. With the conclusion of this summit, the Bush administration funded opportunities for states to create their own standards. As a result, despite the national education goals, states continued to operate their separate academic systems.²

Several efforts for some kind of national standards were born over the next decade. The concept of national “opportunity to learn” standards emerged in the early 1990s, principally as a way to close achievement gaps. Later, the Clinton administration proposed the development of national assessments for reading and math. However, both efforts died as a result of intense political and ideological, as well as educational, battles, the repercussions of which are still felt today. This is evidenced by the determined opposition to the notion of having federally mandated state standards and the push for any future initiatives to be state-led and voluntary.

While efforts to create federally mandated standards failed, standards in four core subject areas—English, mathematics, social studies, and science—became the focus of reform and improvement initiatives within the states. In 1997, for example, only 31 states had standards in the four subject areas; five years later the number had grown to 49. But while all states plus the District of Columbia have standards in the four core subjects today, the content within the standards varies significantly among the states, as does the definition of student proficiency.³

Still, in the process of developing and writing standards and curriculum frameworks, state education leaders and policymakers looked to national organizations, other countries, as well as to other states as models against which to benchmark their own standards. The *Quality Counts 2010* report by Education Week, for example, found that 42 states looked to national organizations when writing or revising their math standards. Meanwhile, California, Massachusetts, and Indiana were the most frequently cited states used for benchmarking standards.

Despite this cross-pollination in standards development using exemplary models, it is no secret that large numbers of policymakers, educators, and business leaders believe the current system is not sufficiently preparing our students for post-secondary work and education. Reading scores for 4th and 8th grade students on the NAEP exam have remained essentially flat for many years, despite significant invest-
ment in reading initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels. This is in sharp contrast to the gains in reading proficiency states have reported for annual yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act.

In fact, a study done by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that states reporting the highest percentages of 4th and 8th students meeting state proficiency standards in reading score the lowest on the international reading assessment, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The same results were found when comparing state mathematics proficiency ratings for 4th and 8th students on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The AIR report concludes that the general trend line is very clear: the higher a state’s proficiency percentage reported for AYP, the lower the proficiency standards are within that state. Lowering proficiency standards in this way provides both policymakers and the public with misleading information about students’ real achievement levels and the quality of states’ education systems.

But the situation is even more complicated—and more disheartening—than states just “gaming the system.” Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and director of the Alliance for Excellence in Education, points out that lowered proficiency standards mean that about 30 percent of students who graduate from high school are not truly prepared for college or the workplace. Add to these another 30 percent of students who do not receive a diploma at all, and we are left with the uncomfortable reality that only 40 percent or so of students who enter 9th grade actually graduate four years later ready for college or work. At the same time, the nation’s college graduation rate has dropped in relation to other countries, going from second highest in the world in 1995 to 15th place currently. Yet a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for a world class 21st century workforce, and it is no longer economically feasible to have 60 percent of the population unprepared for postsecondary education or work. All of this is occurring at a time of increased global competition and higher educational requirements for most jobs.

There is a broad consensus among policymakers and business leaders that if the United States is to maintain its position as the lead superpower, positive reform needs to occur within education. There is a similar consensus that having standards that are fewer, more rigorous, clearer, and aligned with college and career expectations should be the first step in combating this growing achievement crisis. Indeed, the past five years of state-led efforts have seen a shift toward establishing standards that prepare students for postsecondary education and careers. A study conducted by Achieve, Inc. found the number of states that have developed and adopted high school English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics standards that are aligned with college and career expectations has grown significantly. Currently, 31 states have aligned standards compared to three in 2005. In addition, by aligning ELA and mathematics standards with college and career expectations, states have been moving toward a common content in those subjects, despite different standards and state systems. This shift toward a common curriculum aligned with postsecondary work is setting the framework for states to adopt the common core standards and prepare students to enter the global workforce.

With both criticism and optimism, the movement began when governors and chief state school officers in 48 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands signed onto the state-led effort to develop common standards in English Language Arts and mathematics in grades K–12. State board of education members have also participated by attending NASBE-sponsored regional meetings on the Common Core, and NASBE has become a critical partner with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association in furthering this Initiative.

The draft K–12 standards were opened for public comment in March 2010, and after reviewing thousands of comments, the Common Core Initiative released the final version of the standards on June 2, 2010.

Issues to Consider in Adoption

The common core initiative will provide states with fewer, clearer, and higher standards that are research-and-evidence based as well as internationally benchmarked. By adopting the standards, leaders of the initiative believe states will be better equipped to prepare students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and in their careers within a global economy.

There are seven key issues to consider when faced with adoption of the standards.

★ National vs. Common: The Initiative strongly emphasizes that it is a state-led movement in which adoption of the standards is completely voluntary. The standards are “common” rather than “national” to further emphasize the separation of the federal government from this initiative. The Obama Administration has clearly shown its support for the concept of common standards, as demonstrated by its blueprint for ESEA reauthorization and its priorities for the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition. Nevertheless, Arne Duncan told Congress that the standards “are being led by 48 governors and the chiefs…we should not be touching them.”
★ Recommendations for Building Support in States:
Communicating with stakeholders is vital both to build support for adopting the standards and to ensure proper implementation of the standards once they are adopted. Communications strategies include holding conference calls and webinars with legislatures and councils at the state and local level; hosting meetings to engage parents and community members on the process and encouraging them to advocate adoption of the standards; and hosting meetings with district leaders and teachers to let them know how they can contribute to the process of adopting the standards. In some states, the state board and state schools chief have held press events or published editorials in major newspapers to increase awareness of the initiative.

★ Timing of Standards Adoption: With June’s release of the final standards, states face some significant obstacles. While the initiative has not put a deadline for adoption, the Obama Administration has placed deadlines within the RTTT competition. To receive full points, states must adopt common standards by August 2, 2010, with partial points awarded to states if the standards are adopted by December 31, 2010. This gives states two or three months to adopt process if they hope to get full points under RTTT. This poses a significant challenge for the majority of states, as most adoption timelines are longer than six months—and in some cases take more than a year.

Other states face capacity and resource challenges. Colorado, for example, recently spent 18 months revamping 13 different content standards. Throughout the process the state education agency ensured that the standards were fewer, clearer, higher, and benchmarked to high performing countries such as Singapore and Finland. Now the state board faces the dilemma of adopting Colorado’s own ELA and math standards or the Common Core standards. Maine also faces barriers, as its standards are aligned with the standards are to occur within three years of adoption.

★ Economies of Scale: By sharing common standards states are able to maximize financial and human capital resources by creating common assessments, curriculum frameworks, and textbooks and other instructional materials—leaving more resources for other areas of education such as professional development for teachers and administrators.

★ Implementation at the Classroom Level: While the Common Core Initiative has significant support from state and federal governments, it can ultimately fail if not effectively implemented in the classroom. Therefore, parent, teacher, and administrator buy-in and understanding of the initiative are essential. This is difficult in states with strong local control traditions. A grassroots campaign is one strategy to combat this difficulty, but...
it can be hard to conduct amid budget cuts and layoffs. In all, full implementation in schools will add to the up-front cost of adopting common standards, somewhat offsetting the economies of scale saving that will accrue down the road.

State Actions on the Common Core

Since initially signing on to the initiative, many states have taken action to adopt, review, and promote the standards.

★ The Kentucky State Board of Education, in a unanimous vote on February 10, 2010, became the first state to adopt the Common Core State Standards, with plans to implement them in the 2011-2012 school year. To increase the effectiveness and buy-in of the Initiative, education officials have been hosting webinars and conference calls to inform teachers on the structure and content of the standards.

★ Maryland has established a P-20 taskforce to analyze the standards and programs to ensure that they will prepare students to enter college. Plans are also in place for teachers to analyze the standards to increase their familiarity and understanding of them as well as aide Maryland in the adoption of them. The state board of education endorsed the standards on May 25, 2010.

★ Members of the Washington State Board of Education have been working closely with their Superintendent of Public Instruction to get the word out about the standards. As of early February, they held meetings reaching out to 80 stakeholder groups on the initiative as part of the effort to increase knowledge and buy-in.

★ In addition to looking at state standards, Maine has contracted with outside companies to design rubrics to go with the content standards in order to guide instruction in the classroom. This effort is intended to be one aspect of aligning standards with assessments, instruction, and student achievement.

Moving from national goals to individual state standards to federally mandated accountability to voluntary, state-led common standards, the U.S. education reform movement has come a long way; but a majority of the work has been done by individual states and districts. It is important to recognize the significance of state educational leaders working together, collaborating, and sharing resources to help create a generation of stronger learners who are living and working in an increasingly globalized society.

Resources

NASBE’s regularly updated page on the common core is online at: www.nasbe.org/index.php/ccssi.

The main website for the Common Core State Standards Initiative is: www.corestandards.org.

NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve (2008). Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education. This report relays the importance of common standards that are internationally benchmarked. www.achieve.org/Benchmarkingforsuccess.

End Notes


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