Common to the Core: State policymakers consider joining effort to adopt uniform educational standards

By Jennifer Ginn [1]
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The Common Core State Standards Initiative could mean a major change to how education is delivered in states across the nation. Currently, each state has its own K-12 education standards, which shape what students should know and be able to do after completing each grade. However, these standards vary widely between the states. The Common Core initiative will establish a common set of standards in English language arts, math, social studies, and science.


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The phrase “Common Core State Standards Initiative” might not exactly roll off the tongue, but what it represents could mean a major change to how education is delivered in states across the nation.

Right now, each state has its own set of K-12 education standards, which generally are adopted by state boards of education. The standards shape what students should know and be able to do after completing each grade. Those academic standards are used to develop a curriculum, adopt textbooks, make lesson plans and create state assessments.

Because each state has its own set of standards, some of which vary drastically, complications can arise for students and educators. When students transfer from one state to another, the new school must figure out which classes it can accept and which ones the student has to retake because they don’t cover concepts required in the new state.

Colleges, universities and even employers also can’t be sure a high school graduate from Illinois, for example, will have the same skills as one from Kansas.

Common core initiative
That’s where the Common Core State Standards Initiative comes into play. Led by the National Governors Association [5] and the Council of Chief State School Officers [6], groups of experts from

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[5] National Governors Association
across the country have come together over the past two years to come up with a common set of standards in math and English Language Arts. The next subjects to be tackled will be social studies and science.

Although federal common core standards were attempted in the 1990s and failed, this project is being led by the states. So far, 48 states and two territories have joined in on the effort.

“We really believe that setting these standards is the job of the state,” says Chris Minnich, director of standards and assessment at CCSSO. “Right now ... every state has different standards. What we’re trying to do is get states to agree to a set of standards. ... We’re not talking about how these standards should be taught. We’re talking about what a student should be able to do when they leave the educational system.”

Minnich adds that there has been quite a lot of involvement on the part of the states. Once the standards were written by a work group, a feedback panel reviewed them and provided input.

“The last set of feedback, I think, was over 300 pages from the states,” Minnich says. “The states are engaged and they’re vocal. They want to make this work, but they also want to make it close to what they’re doing right now. For some states, that’s a further leap than in other states. At the same time, they’re trying to move the needles on what’s going on in the classroom.”

After all feedback has been considered, the standards will go to a final validation committee comprised of national experts selected by governors and school chiefs. The panel will review the process and the standards to ensure they are research- and evidence-based.

The final version of the new English Language Arts and math standards should be ready in early March, Minnich says. The goal is to have states adopt the standards by the end of June, with three years given to implement them.

“It’s up to the states to make the voluntary decision to adopt [the common core standards],” says Ilene Berman, program director in the education division at the NGA Center for Best Practices. “There are certainly some states where the time line for the adoption process is shorter than others. I think there will be a core group of states that comes on initially; other states may need more time to go through their adoption process.”

One large factor working in the initiative’s favor is the federal government’s highly competitive Race to the Top grant program, funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The program is designed to reward states that are on the cutting edge of providing high-quality education and that have taken significant steps in education reform. One of the criteria on which states are being judged is whether or not they have adopted common standards.

“I think we’ll see a large number of states try to [adopt the common core state standards] early on because of the political momentum,” Minnich says. “They can capitalize on that right now. I think there will be a second group of states that will do it as part of their normal standards revision process. ...”

“I’m hopeful that a large number of states will adopt [the standards]. I think we’re doing everything we can to make sure all of the states feel like they are a part of this conversation.”

Legislators eye standards cautiously
North Dakota Lt. Gov. Jack Dalrymple, who chairs the North Dakota Commission on Education Improvement, says that at first, he was somewhat hesitant to recommend joining the common core initiative.
“Although we are normally not big on signing up for national standards generally,” he says, “in this case we decided that we would because we felt we would be in the group of states that would be compatible with [the new standards]. And we also feel ultimately, the nation does need some focus in terms of our K-12 expectations, our K-12 assessments and what a graduating senior is expected to know as they apply for a college anywhere in the United States. We believe it is generally necessary and we’re going to be a part of it.”

Dalrymple says he was uncertain about how the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, which will have to approve any core content changes, will react to the final standards. He points out that some critics believe the state should carefully guard its right to shape its own standards and education policy.

“But on the other hand, if our state standards turn out to be very close to some kind of national goal, then ... it’s not so much a matter of principle. From a practical standpoint, would it make any difference if we made some minor modifications to our state standards ... so we are in sync with the nation?”

Sen. Rich Wardner of North Dakota, a former educator, says that policymakers will carefully consider the decision and will look to neighboring states before they make a move. Kentucky already has gone on record to say it will adopt the new common core standards. Wardner says that kind of move by Kentucky, a state which he says is similar to North Dakota, carries weight with him.

Lisa Gross, director of the Division of Communications for the Kentucky Department of Education, says the state is eager to be a leader in education and has been taking aggressive steps for the past two decades to reform education.

“These standards are going to be higher, clearer and more rigorous,” Gross says. “They will be very consistent among states. We [will be able to] say we know that students in Kentucky are learning the same thing as students in Connecticut. That’s key.”

She points out, for example, that states on the East Coast tend to have good educational outcomes, in part because they have rigorous standards.

“We want to be able to show our students are capable of reaching those standards too,” Gross says. Rep. Greg Porter of Indiana, chair of the House Education Committee, says he also remains cautious about common core state standards until he finds out more about how the entire process will work. “There’s always a level of apprehension,” Porter says. “The devil’s always in the details. ... How do we get there together? We’re not going to [achieve educational proficiency] at the same time. Some are going to get there in two years or three years, some may take five years to get there.”

In the end, Porter says, he believes the new common core state standards will be adopted by the state board of education in Indiana. He says that the executive branch, in particular, is pushing for the reforms because of their potential not only to achieve educational improvements, but also to address concerns about implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act and give Indiana a leg up on Race to the Top funding.

“I think in theory we want to take significant action steps and have systemic changes to deal with the 21st century and globalization. But everyone is not at the same spot. How do you get to where they want us to be?” Porter says

**Making comparisons among states**

One reason proponents are advocating for states to adopt common core education standards is the
inconsistency among states in what students are expected to learn in different grades. For example, students whose state test score deems them “proficient” in one state might not necessarily be considered proficient in a different state.

Since educational standards vary, how do policymakers find out how their standards compare with those in other states?

One available resource is the National Center for Education Statistics’ “state mapping” tool. Since 2003, the NCES has been translating individual states’ standards onto a common scale: the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The NAEP, or “The Nation’s Report Card,” is a standardized assessment given to students throughout the country.

By converting students’ performance on state standards to the NAEP, policymakers can gauge how rigorous their standards are compared with those of other states.

For example, if a state reports that 75 percent of its students meet the state’s standard and if 75 percent of those students score higher than 215 on the NAEP, then 215 is the NAEP equivalent for that state’s standard.

The study’s authors, however, caution that the scores are not meant to judge individual state standards, but rather allow policymakers to compare where they set the bar in terms of student achievement for different grades.

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