Illinois Rep. Roger Eddy, a school district superintendent, told policymakers that it’s easy for a canoe to turn into a yacht. He was speaking at the Common Core State Standards Policy Roundtable on Dec. 6 at CSG’s 2010 National Meeting in Providence, R.I.

About 80 percent of the states have adopted common core, an initiative led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Common core standards define the knowledge and skills students should have in grades K-12 in English language arts and math in order to graduate high school ready to succeed in college or the work force—regardless of where they live.

“Common core standards allow us to set the same goals for all children, no matter where they live throughout the nation,” said Lucille Davy, senior adviser for the James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy.

More than 40 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted common core this year. Now they face another challenge—implementation. While the idea is simple, like a canoe, Eddy said, how it will be implemented is a lot more complicated, like a yacht.

“Implementing, this is a simple term, sounds like a simple concept, it really does,” Eddy said. “But it’s tremendously complicated. The implications are complicated and the unintended consequences of implementing this kind of program are enormous.”

States need to be thinking about a variety of things, the speakers said. Professional development for teachers needs to be a top priority. States also must examine textbooks and the curriculum. But one of the biggest concerns for states is trying to figure out how to transition to a common assessment, which is still being designed.

“Teachers are being caught in a time war,” said Barbara Kapinus, senior policy analyst with the National Education Association. “... Right now, teachers are very excited about implementing the new standards and trying to do it in their classrooms, yet they’re being held accountable for what’s on the old assessment.”

Patricia Sullivan, deputy director of the American Federation of Teachers, said schools will implement the new standards next September.

“You will be tested based on the old standards. Then my salary as a teacher will be based on the test
results,” Sullivan said. “The new test doesn’t come in until 2014 and all of the requirements of No Child Left Behind are still in place. It’s not fair and there’s nothing you can do about it. That’s a real problem and it has to be solved.”

Eddy said shrinking budgets also will be a big challenge for implementing common core, but it is a challenge that must be faced and overcome. Illinois is facing a $12 billion to $13 billion deficit with expected revenue of about $27 billion for the fiscal year, he said.

“We can’t just think because we throw in a whole bunch of new standards ... that’s going to automatically improve teaching and learning,” Eddy said. “There’s more that goes into it.

“The most important thing we should be concerned about in implementation is whether or not we are preparing students for college and career and does this do that. I think it does, but it’s not going to work unless we make the investments we need to make.”

Cooperation may be the key to successful implementation in the states.

The NEA and AFT are helping teachers understand the new standards. The National PTA is working with parents on understanding common core and their role in helping their child learn. The Council of State Governments’ Common Core State Standards Policy Initiative is working with states to help them understand the issues in implementation. States and the federal government will need to work together on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to ensure states and teachers aren’t penalized for teaching the common core when it comes to assessment.

The rewards for success, Davy noted, are high.

“It’s important all kids, no matter where they live, have options for the future,” she said. “Do they want to work (or) go to school? (It’s important) that it’s not decided for them by virtue of what they didn’t learn in the K-12 system. We want to make sure they have that opportunity.”