

STATES FIND COMMON (CORE) GROUND

by Jennifer Ginn



EXCHANGE SCHOOL RECESS
MUNCIE, IND.—Friends Cassy Wilson, left, and Sara Barnhizer walk through the parking lot during recess at Heritage Hall in Muncie, Ind. In the classroom, students are facing more rigorous educational standards and more than 30 states have adopted common core standards for English language arts and mathematics. (©AP Photo / The Star Press, Kurt Hostetler)

Former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise likens American students' academic performance to the recent Winter Olympics.

"What if I told you these were the results—15th in speed skating, in bobsledding 21st, skiing at 24th and luge 25th. Anybody remember it happening that way?" said Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a nonprofit group dedicated to all children graduating high school ready for college or a career.

"That, of course, is not what happened at the Winter Olympics. It is what happened

in 2007 for the academic Olympics. That is when our 15-year-olds, in a demographically weighted sample, took the same test as did 15-year-olds in the 30 most developed nations in the world. ... This is how we came out—15th in reading, 21st in science, 24th in problem-solving and 25th in math."

The college graduation rates aren't much better for the U.S.

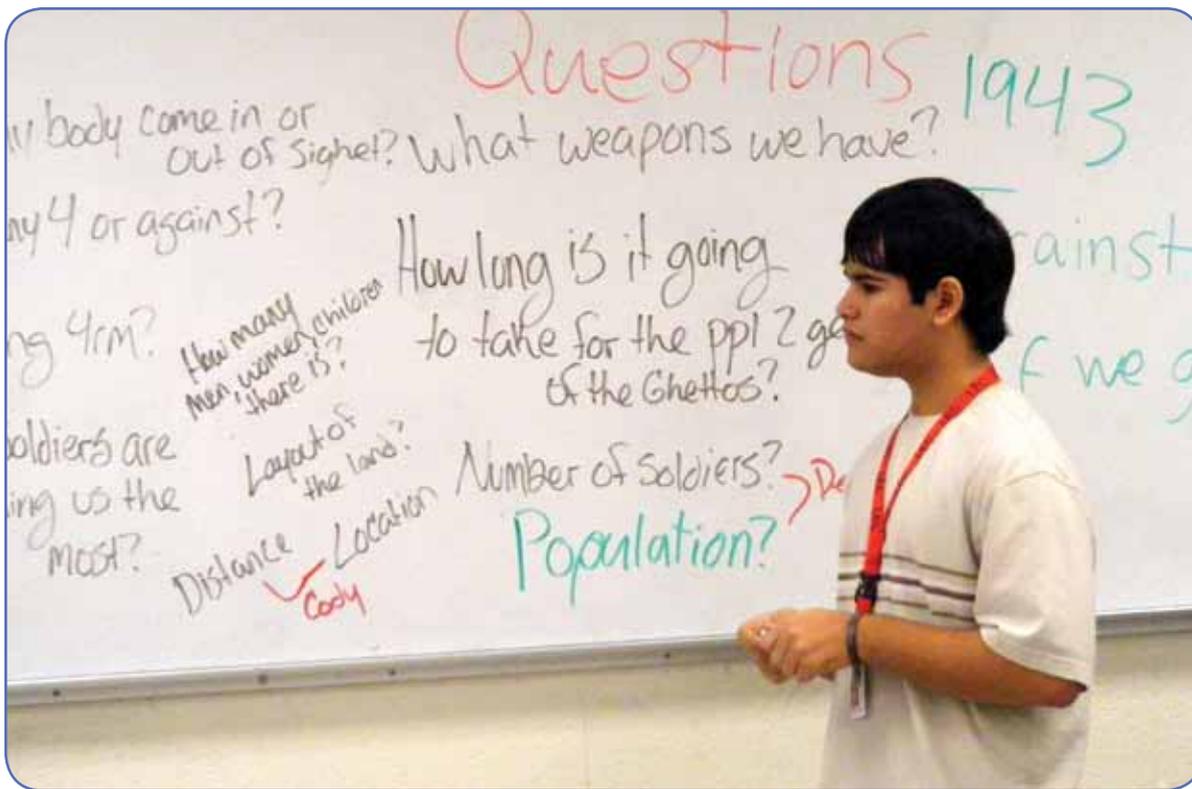
In 1995, the U.S. was second of developed nations in students graduating high school and going on to receive four-year degrees, Wise said. In 10 years, the U.S. dropped to

15th, he said. The U.S. is a little better on two-year programs, but has dropped from second to 10th place.

Raising Standards

So how does America compete in the global marketplace when its students are performing at about the same level—or worse—as former Soviet bloc nations on international tests? One possible answer getting a lot of play nationally is Common Core State Standards.

Each state has its own set of academic standards, which generally are adopted by the



HIGHER STANDARDS

SANFORD, N.C.—Then-freshman Jonathan Colonroche leads a discussion during his literature class at Lee Early College in Sanford, N.C. The school offered both core high school and college classes free of charge. States across the country are considering more rigorous standards as part of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. (© AP Photo / Chelsea Kellner / Sanford Herald)

only deepened when adopting common core became one way states could earn more points on their Race

state board of education. The standards shape what students should know and be able to do in each grade. Those standards are used to develop a curriculum, adopt textbooks, make lesson plans and create state assessments.

In the past, each state set its own standards, some varying drastically. When students move from one state to another, there's often a problem with which classes transfer and which ones the student has to retake due to different standards. Colleges, universities and even employers can't be sure a high school graduate from Nevada will have the same skills as one from Ohio.

That's where the Common Core State Standards Initiative comes into play. Led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, experts from across the country came together the past two years to develop a common set of standards in mathematics and English language arts. Although common core standards were attempted at the federal level in the 1990s and failed, this project is led by the states. Forty-eight states (all except for Alaska and Texas) and Washington, D.C., signed on to work on the standards; so far, 35 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted them.

The rallying cry of the Common Core State Standards movement is, "Fewer, Clearer, Higher."

On average, there is one standard in the

common core for every two or three typical state standards, said Keith Gayler, program director of standards, assessment and accountability for the Council of Chief State School Officers. The reduced number of standards, said Gayler, is good when most states have so many things packed into their standards that teachers literally cannot cover them all in a school year. Fewer, more focused standards mean teachers can go in-depth and promote deeper understanding, he said.

"Clearer means more obvious learning expectations in the end," Gayler said. Current standards are often vague. For instance, the standard could be "understand." "So what does that mean for the classroom teacher? How do you show understanding with a student? You want to make sure it's something that's teachable and assessable in terms of standards."

Higher standards are connected to college and career readiness. Students should be prepared to pass basic college math or English language arts courses, he said. "That's really the goal in terms of college readiness here," said Gayler.

A State Movement

One of the biggest hurdles facing Common Core State Standards has been the belief that it is a push by the federal government to tell states how to educate children. That belief

to the Top application, a \$4.35 billion Department of Education competitive grant fund designed to encourage states to make education reforms.

"I think the biggest obstacle is the perception that Washington is involved," said Rep. Rob Eissler, chairman of the House Public Education Committee in Texas. "... In Texas, people see what the reach of the federal government can be and they don't see a lot of good in that. If this is even close, it doesn't have a chance."

Eissler sees positives with common core—efficiency, resources and instructional materials. "There are a lot of good things about it, but Texas doesn't trust Washington," he said.

Rebecca Garland, chief academic officer for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, said the states have a say in how common core works. "It's voluntary whether your state wants to do it. ... People don't like for the federal government to tell them what to do in education. This takes that part of the equation away because it is state-driven. It is bottom up, not top down."

Adoption Is the Easy Part

Although more than half of all states have adopted common core, the process is far from over. Implementation of the new standards is expected to take two to three years. Teacher education programs will need to adapt to teach

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the new standards, professional development for current teachers will have to take place, new curricula must be written and textbooks adopted, as well as new assessments developed to measure how well students are learning.

But even with that added workload, states can expect to save money in the long run. Two national consortia of states have formed to compete for federal money to develop common assessments, which are expected to be in place by the 2014–15 school year. States spend \$1.3 billion each year for assessments that fit their own standards; Illinois alone spends \$60 million annually. By sharing those costs with a common assessment, states could potentially save millions.

“We know this work isn’t going to be cheap; it isn’t simple,” Gayler said. “But it’s work that states do all the time. They revise their standards. If they don’t revise their standards, they’re irrelevant. So these costs are going to come up for you in the future as standards get revised. This might be a way to share some of those costs.”

Garland agrees there are economic benefits. “If publishers know these standards are being used across a variety of states, they can spend more in the development of resources because the potential market for those resources will be larger. They can put more into making them higher quality and we can benefit from economies of scale,” she said.

Economy is the Challenge

But perhaps the biggest challenge to adopting and implementing common core has

nothing to do with education—it’s the economy.

Pennsylvania Rep. James Roebuck, who chairs the House Education Committee and serves on the state’s board of education, views the common core as a positive, but, “again, there’s a resistance (by local school districts) to being told what to do. ... Also the perception of when you’re telling people what to do, it has a price tag with it. If there’s no money to go with it, there’s also resistance. Everything we do, there’s always the question of how much is it going to cost.”

Illinois Rep. Roger Eddy, chair of the House Public Education Committee and superintendent of a small school district for 15 years, agrees.

“The big concern is the climate, the recession, the way funding is affecting current programs,” he said. “I don’t care what it is, it’s hard to talk about something now except how we’re going to get through the next year, year and a half.”

Regardless of the poor economy, Eddy noted, moving ahead with implementing common core is important.

“The key reason it’s a good thing is it ... emphasizes career readiness,” Eddy said. “Right now, people look at the standards and say, ‘If I’m not going to college, why are they important to me?’ It’s because of the career readiness.” ☐

Teaching Common Core 101 »

The Council of State Governments’ **Education Policy Group** is playing a key role in helping states begin the discussion on implementing Common Core State Standards. CSG has conducted five regional meetings across the country to inform legislators about what common core is—a Common Core 101 discussion. It also is working on 16 state-specific meetings this summer to get all stakeholders in a particular state involved in planning how best to implement the new standards.

The meetings are possible through educational support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

For More on the Core »

- **Common Core State Standards Initiative:**
<http://www.corestandards.org/>
- **The Council of State Governments:**
<http://www.csg.org/policy/CommonCoreStateStandardsPolicyInitiative.aspx>
- **National PTA’s work on the Common Core State Standards Initiative:**
http://www.pta.org/common_core_state_standards.asp
- **Council of Chief State School Officers’ cost analysis of the economic impact of Common Core State Standards will be posted this fall.**
<http://www.ccsso.org/>

CASE STUDIES

by Pam Goins

Kentucky

Transforming Education

Kentucky was the first. Even before final educational standards were released, Kentucky signed up for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The legislature enacted Senate Bill 1 Feb. 10, revising the assessment and accountability system for K–12 education in Kentucky.

The legislation connected standards to national and international benchmarks in order to increase the rigor of K–12 education and increase the number of college-ready students. It included a directive for the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Kentucky Department of Education to collaborate throughout the process.

“Involving ourselves in this initiative allowed us to rely on the expertise that (the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers) brought to the table and reduce costs,” said Michael Miller, director of curriculum at the Kentucky Department of Education.

The bill called for the agencies to revise the state’s

academic content standards. Under the legislation, the revised content standards must meet the following requirements:

- Focus on critical knowledge and skills needed for success in the global economy;
- Result in fewer, but more in-depth standards to ensure students grasp and master the required skills;
- Communicate expectations more clearly and concisely to teachers, parents, students and Kentucky residents;
- Be based on evidence-based research;
- Consider international benchmarks; and
- Ensure the standards are aligned from elementary to high school to postsecondary education so students can be successful at each educational level.

The state provided training this summer and teachers began instruction related to the standards this fall. Students will be assessed on the standards in spring 2012.



Illinois

A Common Message

The Illinois State Board of Education adopted the common standards for K–12 education June 24 as a means to better prepare students for success in college and careers.

“The goal is to have fewer, clearer and higher standards focused on college and career expectations,” state school board Chair Jesse H. Ruiz said in a press release from the Illinois State Board of Education. “Our board supports these new standards because they are essential for our students, for their futures and for the future economy of Illinois.”

During a discussion with The Council of State Governments, Illinois officials said messaging and communication will be vital to the success of effective implementation of the standards. Officials’ suggestions included:

- Use state terminology of “Illinois standards of learning” so all parties understand what academic standards have been revised;
- Focus on the aspect of college and career readiness when speaking to parents and stress the importance of reducing remedial education needs once

students are in college;

- Emphasize the fact that students, who may not all be headed for postsecondary education, will be prepared for non-degree certification programs and have the skills needed in the work force; and
- Reaffirm the idea that career is the final outcome whether a student attends college or enters the work force after high school and the common standards will prepare them with the necessary skills.

“(The adoption) is critically important for the future of Illinois students, our economy and our state,” State Superintendent of Education Christopher A. Koch said in the press release. “It is vital that we establish clear, consistent and rigorous learning standards to ensure our students, teachers and parents have a clear understanding of what students need to know and be able to do to be prepared for success after high school.”

The Illinois State Board of Education will host a series of regional informational meetings to officially launch the Common Core State Standards in conjunction with the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Board of Higher Education.



New Hampshire

Preparation is Key to Success

The New Hampshire Department of Education took the message of the common core state standards on the road.

The department held 14 two-hour feedback sessions across the state to gauge reaction to the common core standards in February and March. More than 200 teachers and curriculum leaders from more than half the school districts in the state came together to discuss the clarity and appropriateness of the common core standards in English language arts and mathematics.

“Teachers and specialists have informed us that the Common Core State Standards appear to align closely with our current New England Common Assessment standards,” said New Hampshire Commissioner of Education Virginia M. Barry.

But even though the standards make a good fit for the state, that doesn’t mean all the work will come easy or fast.

“My overall message is don’t panic,” said Deb Wiswell, administrator of curriculum, assessment, accountability and school improvement at the New Hampshire Department of Education. “This is a long project. It’s had its beginnings over the past year, but it will be around for a while so there’s no need to do anything rash this

summer. There is time to be deliberate and thoughtful.”

With that in mind, the state board of education also hosted two public hearings to receive direct feedback from the public. Additionally, staff created and distributed a written feedback form to gather comments to pass along to state board members for consideration.

The New Hampshire State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards July 8. From there, the department of education created a timeline that stretches to 2015 for assessing the new standards. It includes:

- Fall 2010—testing as usual; review of standards ongoing
- Fall 2011—traditional state testing with possible field testing of new items
- Fall 2012—traditional state testing with transitional test items aligned to the common core standards
- Fall 2013—final administration of traditional state test with infusion of transitional test items for students
- Fall 2014—no test given to New Hampshire students with U.S. Department of Education approval to align with other state testing that is given in the spring
- Spring 2015—new state assessment based on the Common Core State Standards



Florida

Combining Legislative, Executive Branch Strategies

In Florida, legislators have long taken an interest in setting educational standards.

It is, after all, part of their responsibility. And long before the Common Core State Standards Initiative started taking shape, legislators were working with the state Board of Education to create more rigorous standards for students.

In 2006, the Florida legislature enacted House Bill 7087, which required the state Board of Education to periodically review the state’s content standards. That same year, the board adopted a six-year cycle to schedule regular reviews and revision of content standards, including necessary alignment with assessments, instructional materials, professional development and teacher licensure exams.

Building on that effort, the Florida legislature en-

acted Senate Bill 1908 in 2008 instructing the state Board of Education to create the next generation of standards. Stakeholders at the time deemed the mathematics standards acceptable, but decided the reading and language arts standards needed revision, and the state board began a revision process to comply with the legislation.

So it seemed like a natural progression when the board adopted the common core standards July 27 to replace earlier standards.

“I’m very pleased with the tremendous amount of work that has gone into developing these standards and am appreciative of all the individuals involved in producing a draft that truly seeks to make our children highly competitive in these critical subject areas,” Commissioner of Education Eric Smith said in a statement to the *Orlando Sentinel*.

