Less than 40 years ago, nearly 75 percent of the jobs in the U.S. could be filled by workers with no more than a high school diploma. Manufacturing, farming and construction work, among many others, typically required no formal education beyond 12th grade. But as technology has advanced and critical problem-solving skills became inseparably linked with most occupations, so too has the level of education required for most jobs that were once classified as unskilled. As a result, a new norm related to the level of education needed for the jobs of the future is rapidly developing.

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workplace projects that by 2018, nearly three-fourths of all jobs in the U.S. will require some college. One-third of those jobs will require a bachelor’s or graduate degree, and another 12 percent an associate degree from a two- or four-year college. Those filling the 17 percent of jobs that require some college, but not a postsecondary degree, will need to have strong math, reading and writing skills to be college-ready.

Most high school graduates today do not meet all college-readiness benchmarks. According to a 2010 analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, only 24 percent of ACT-tested high school graduates met college benchmark scores in all four academic subjects: English, math, reading and science.

Adoption and full implementation of common core state standards is widely viewed as a significant policy statement to ensure more students graduate from high school with college- and career-readiness skills to be successful once they graduate. The designers of the standards, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association in consultation with teachers, parents, experts and administrators, intended them to be aligned with college and work expectations. Those standards:

- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Are informed by top-performing countries so all students are prepared to succeed in the global economy and society; and
- Are evidence- and research-based.³

Although most states were quick to adopt the common core state standards, experts point out that adoption is merely a first step. Successful implementation of the standards is the key to achieving the goal of college- and career-readiness. A report issued by the Center for Education Policy concludes that in many states, it will take until 2013 or later to fully implement the more complex changes associated with the new academic standards.⁴ Legislators and elected and appointed state education leaders must make many critical decisions soon to ensure successful implementation of the standards in a timely fashion.

Assessment
Assessing student progress is costly but mandatory under the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Even in states that have received federal waivers from accountability provisions of the law, it remains vitally important for local, state and federal education leaders to know if students are learning the skills required to be college- and career-ready. Current state assessments already are considered obsolete by many education experts; therefore new assessments must be put in place aligned to the new common core state standards.

The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers received federal Race to the Top funding to work with states to create a new generation of student assessments. States adopting common core state standards have joined one or both of these consortia. Both are developing traditional summative assessments, which are given to students at the end of the school year to test their achievement. The consortia also include formative assessments, which teachers can give throughout the year to determine whether students are progressing as they should.

Using one of these common assessments can result in a potential savings for states, because the cost of designing and scoring student tests will be spread over multiple states rather than each state being required to create, administer and score its own, unique assessment. The test results also will provide a reliable measure to compare student achievement among multiple states giving the same assessment. The current patchwork of state assessments makes this data comparison impossible.

Accountability
One of the primary purposes of end-of-year student assessments is to provide a basis for accountability for schools and local school districts. These assessments must provide a transparent means to tell the public, local education leaders, and state and federal policymakers to what extent students are learning the knowledge and skills they are supposed to learn. Data from the testing provide vital information about where improvement is needed.

The Council of Chief State School Officers, which represents state school chiefs, suggests policymakers should adopt accountability systems that include high school graduation requirements, accreditation criteria for individual schools and districts, policies related to grade promotion (e.g. expectations for students to advance from one grade to the next), and state evaluation of school and district performance.⁵

Teachers and the Common Core Standards
In order for common core state standards or other similar college- and career-ready academic standards to be successful, policymakers must consider how to ensure teachers and education leaders are adequately trained and whether they possess knowledge about what is included in the more rigorous standards, and how they can ensure their students are able to meet the new expectations. This will require an investment in innovative and comprehensive professional development programs for teachers and administrators. In many cases, changes in teaching and learning may be required. New evaluation systems for educators will, in some cases, need to be developed along with curriculum materials and other resources that are linked to common core state standards.

In many cases, this means K–12 and postsecondary education policymakers will have to collaborate to ensure the new standards provide a seamless transition so students have the knowledge and skills to be successful in postsecondary education without having to take remedial courses. Some of the higher education policy changes that may be necessary include aligning the academic content of teacher education programs with the common core state standards. Teacher pre-service programs at postsecondary colleges of education should become incubators where future teachers are introduced to these more rigorous standards and prepared to teach to them upon graduation. State policymakers also should consider aligning college admission requirements and the first-year undergraduate core curriculum with the new standards.
Kentucky Leads the Way in College-Ready Standards

In February 2010, Kentucky’s Board of Education took the monumental step of adopting the common core state standards. What made the decision monumental was that the standards hadn’t even been finalized or released to the public at the time Kentucky provisionally adopted them. It would be another four months before the standards were unveiled. Yet Kentucky education leaders were confident the standards would set the benchmark for college- and career-readiness standards.

One year earlier, the Kentucky legislature enacted Senate Bill 1, designed to raise the quality of elementary and postsecondary education in the state. The bill called for the development and implementation of revisions to Kentucky’s academic content standards. This paved the way for the adoption one year later of common core state standards by the state’s education leadership.

Kentucky is widely viewed as leading the nation in the standards’ implementation. The implementation of the common core state standards has given Kentucky an opportunity to prepare students with content that is more focused and coherent and demands a deeper level of learning. Establishing specific expectations for preschool through grade 12 and also aligning standards with postsecondary institutions’ expectations will result in a seamless approach to learning from the time a child enters school until he or she graduates from college.

In February 2011, the Kentucky Department of Education developed Kentucky’s College and Career Readiness Delivery Plan, a collaboration with higher education officials which specifies the strategies for increasing the number of students that are college- and career-ready. One of the Plan’s goals is to increase the percentage of students who graduate college- and career-ready from Kentucky high schools from 34 percent at the Plan’s inception to 67 percent by 2015. The second goal is to increase the percentage of high school freshmen who graduate from 76 percent in 2010 to 90 percent in 2015.

The Kentucky Department of Education and the state’s Council on Postsecondary Education have placed a strong emphasis on increasing pathways for students through acceleration and intervention supports. This includes expanding advanced placement and dual credit opportunities with increased rigor and STEM—science, technology, engineering and math—coursework aligned to college- and career-ready expectations.

Within one month of adoption of common core state standards, the Kentucky Department of Education provided local school districts with a contrast in Kentucky’s former standards and the newly adopted ones. State education leadership also worked closely with district and school leaders to ensure the provisions of common core state standards were understood and being implemented properly on the local level.

Beginning with the 2011–12 school year, teachers and administrators began to design new learning experiences for students based on the more rigorous common core state standards. According to department of education staff, year two of common core state standards implementation is designed to integrate the components of teacher and leader professional growth and effectiveness system, along with strategies for implementing the standards and the valid use of data.

Notes


About the Author

Tim Weldon is an education policy analyst at The Council of State Governments. He is a former television and newspaper journalist and high school social studies teacher. He holds an M.S. degree in secondary education curriculum.