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Navigating the Common Core

The debate over the Common Core

State Standards Initiative has rocketed to the forefront of education policy discussions around the country. More than 3,000 stories were written about the common core in August of 2013 alone, with another 3,000-plus in September. While gallons of ink have been spilled trying to make sense of it all, there remains much confusion about where this reform is headed. Despite some potential benefits from the common core standards, to be successful the policy must navigate a field of mines, any one of which could blow the enterprise sky-high.

There is certainly value to having a common set of clear, cross-state standards, and its developers have two things absolutely right: First, common standards will clarify the brave new world of online and blended learning and the explosion of innovative and useful technology resources for students. It is of enormous help to developers to have a uniform set of standards to guide the design of their applications. When I started in education, I taught in Montgomery, Alabama, a small city in a state with much less access to customized textbooks and resources than larger and

wealthier cities and states. With a common set of standards, the innovations of developers in Silicon Valley can be downloaded as easily in Alabama as in California. At least in theory, the greater, nationwide competition among developers should drive down costs and drive up quality. Lesson-sharing web sites like BetterLesson and Share My Lesson can benefit teachers from across the country, helping them separate grain from chaff.

Second, there is also something to be said for having common expectations for all students. This is not a new idea.

Thomas Jefferson outlined a pretty reasonable set of standards back in 1818. He said every student should be taught the skills and knowledge necessary to transact his

own business, improve his morals and faculties, understand his duty to his neighbors and country, know his rights, vote in an informed manner, and hold elected officials responsible. Core Knowledge guru E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* has brought this call into the 21st century. Echoing Jefferson, Hirsch argues that a basic set of common knowledge is essential to our economy, our democracy, and our society.

Complexities threaten implementation

by MICHAEL Q. McSHANE

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But the common core is not the only game in town. All across the country, states are reforming teacher preparation and evaluation, technology policy, school finance, school organization, and a host of other facets of the American education system. The question is not, therefore, are these standards “good” or “bad,” but rather, whether they will be successfully integrated into existing efforts to reform schooling. On this score, I remain skeptical.

Three forces will be central in determining whether or not the common core is ultimately successful in accelerating and not hindering efforts to reform education: oversight, infrastructure, and politics.

Oversight

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia with the strong support of the U.S. Department of Education (ED). While this genesis was great for securing the backing of various stakeholders and for ensuring the successful adoption of the standards, such an origin does not have clear implications for long-term management and oversight. There are numerous tasks that a CCSS governing body would need to undertake, including revising the standards as needed, holding states accountable for faithful implementation of the standards and administration of the tests, and fostering cooperation across states so as to leverage the national scope of the project. To date, it is not clear who or what is going to perform these functions.

If states are allowed to create their own tests and set the associated cut scores for proficiency or implement the standards as they best interpret them, any “common” element of the common core will fade away. This risks fracturing the national marketplace the standards created back into the 50 independent markets that existed before the standards were adopted. Whatever other impact this would have, it would certainly prevent the common core from living up to any Jeffersonian or wide-open market ideal.

Former National Education Association chief John Wilson has called for the creation of a “Common Core Czar” to manage the common core. He believes that this person, who would need to have “excellent education credentials including teaching experience, understand a systems approach to education, and have the trust of teachers and parents” and “the respect of both political parties,” could be appointed by the NGA and CCSSO

to “oversee the implementation, call out bad practices, and recommend policy changes to the politicians.” Quite a tall order, especially if the “czar” has no government-based authority.

Patrick McGuinn, a Drew University political scientist, has offered several other possible models for common core governance. Leaders could create a national network of organizations like the NGA and CCSSO, as well as prominent nonprofits and unions, that would serve as revisers, implementation watchdogs, and political advisors. Alternatively, a structure could be developed like the National Assessment Governing Board, which currently oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Empowered by law, the board is required to represent major constituent groups. States could then enter into a memorandum of understanding to agree to abide by the board’s rulings. If that is too heavy-handed, states could band together in smaller groups with interstate compacts that promise particular behaviors and create organizations to help them achieve their goals. One possible manifestation of such an organization could look like the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), a consortium of three states (New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) that formed in 2004 to create a common assessment framework.

These states deal with each other through informal agreements and with their existing staffs to develop and vet standards, assessments, accommodations, and reporting.

So far, no one has stepped up to handle these issues, despite the scale and scope of the activities that must be under way within the next year or so. It is all too easy to default to the federal government and say that it is the only organization with the capacity to do these tasks. In 2011, the Albert Shanker Institute, a think tank aligned with the American Federation of Teachers, called for the creation of a national curriculum aligned to the common core. Among its recommendations to make the project work? “Increasing federal investments in implementation support.” Until such a time that another body develops with both the oversight capacity and the leverage to get states to do what they promise, folks will look to the federal government.

This is problematic. While it is true that linking future federal dollars or regulatory relief to faithful implementation of the standards might induce state and local compliance, the Department of Education does not in fact have the statutory authority to take control of the common core (although many of the decisions related to No Child Left Behind [NCLB] waivers have stretched the statutory limits). Beyond the legal hurdles, ED would be hard-pressed to ensure faithful implementation of such

a complex program in 100,000 schools in 14,000 school districts in 50 states across the country.

Infrastructure

New assessments for the common core, currently being developed by two multistate consortia, will rely on technology to an unprecedented degree. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) are creating computer-adaptive exams that will offer customized questions based on student responses, which will measure what students do and do not know more efficiently and accurately than standardized tests have in the past. The current generation's paper-and-pencil tests are forced to offer the same bank of questions to all students, with more discerning questions mostly clustered around proficiency cutoffs. This design gives the most accuracy to the judgment of proficiency that is tied to consequences under the NCLB accountability rules.

In order to use the SBAC and PARCC tests, schools need hardware. Both sets of tests are designed to be taken on desktops, laptops, and tablets (provided the tablets have keyboards that can be attached), but even with the diverse set of compatible devices, many schools are struggling to prepare. The state of Arizona needs to spend an estimated \$230.2 million statewide to get schools up to standard. The Boston-based Pioneer Institute (which, in fairness, has made its opposition to the common core well known) estimates a cost of \$6.87 billion for technology to bring schools up to par with the requirements of common core assessments. This includes \$2.8 billion in up-front costs for initial purchases of new hardware and software, \$326 million for the first year of operation, and \$624 million for the following six years of implementation.

Bandwidth is also an issue. The State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA), which worked with both assessment consortia to estimate bandwidth needs, recommends Internet speed of 1 gigabyte per second per 1,000 students. Many states are not even close. In Arkansas, for example, only 12 percent of schools have the recommended broadband speed. Education SuperHighway, which advocates for technology in schools, used a quick speed test completed by more than 600,000 students and teachers nationwide to determine that 72 percent of schools lack necessary high-speed Internet bandwidth.

It is possible that testing mandates will kick-start investment in technology infrastructure. Provided that these funds are spent on devices that can be used for more than just testing once a year, this would be a clear benefit.

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There are serious risks, however. Cash-strapped districts have an incentive to try to purchase whatever tools are the least expensive while meeting the minimal requirements for testing. These devices will very soon be obsolete in the ever-evolving world of technology and need to be replaced or be unable to support new tools being developed that are aligned to the common core. This would represent an enormous waste of resources.

Politics

Technology is the least explosive of the mines waiting to go off if a misstep takes place. Political impediments span the spectrum. What began as a bipartisan effort by state governors has shed most of its Republican wing, as some early supporters on the right have begun to express misgivings. Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee took to his web site in a post titled "Common Core Is Dead" to distance himself from, in his words, "what the Common Core has become": "top-down federal intrusion into local schools" and "agenda driven curriculum that indoctrinates instead of educates." Other (at least nominal) initial supporters from the Republican ranks like Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal and Wisconsin governor Scott Walker have

both expressed discomfort with the common core standards. Indiana governor Mike Pence, the successor to strong common core-supporting Republican Mitch Daniels, pulled the Hoosier State out of the PARCC consortium in July 2013 and in January 2014 called for the state to create its own standards "written by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers."

Meanwhile, the Obama administration appears to have little interest in substantively engaging with its critics. In a speech in June 2013, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sought to separate the federal government from the initiative:

The federal government didn't write [the standards], didn't approve them, and doesn't mandate them. And we never will. Anyone who says otherwise is either misinformed or willfully misleading.

Let me say that one more time—the federal government didn't write them, didn't approve them, and doesn't mandate them. Anyone who says otherwise is either misinformed or willfully misleading.

The line the federal government has walked in promoting the standards has been much finer than Duncan's comments

Can state-level bureaucrats, operating in a politically charged environment, implement a radical overhaul of what K-12 students learn?



indicate. Later in that same speech, Duncan acknowledged that the Department of Education “absolutely encouraged” states to adopt the standards through Race to the Top. In the scoring rubric for Race to the Top, 40 of the 500 total points were awarded for “standards and assessments.” Earning these points required “commitment to adopting a common set of high-quality standards” and “participation in a consortium of States that is working toward jointly developing and adopting a common set of K-12 standards” that “includes a significant number of states.” With respect to assessments, to earn points states also needed to provide evidence that they were participating in a consortium that was working on assessments.

But carrots are not sticks. Sanctions showed up in 2011 when the Department of Education mentioned the common core in requirements for regulatory relief from some of the more onerous requirements of No Child Left Behind. The policy document begins, “To receive flexibility through the waivers outlined above, an SEA [state education agency] must submit a request that addresses each of the following four principles.” The first is “College- and Career-Ready Expectations for All Students.” What do those expectations look like? The first sentence reads, “Over the past few years, Governors and Chief State School Officers have developed and adopted rigorous academic content standards to prepare all students for success in college and careers in the 21st Century. States are also coming together to develop the next generation of assessments aligned with these new standards.” While common core is not directly named, it is hard to read that document and not think that it is referring to the common core. It is true that Texas, Alaska, and Virginia have called the department’s bluff, opting not to embrace the standards and receiving waivers regardless, but that does not prove that the federal government was not attempting to promote these standards. It just proves it was not willing to go to the mattresses on it when states pushed back.

Pushback from the political left continues as well. As the common core is integrated into teacher and school accountability systems, those that take issue with accountability policies are starting to conflate that opposition with antipathy toward the common core. American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten went so far as to say that the implementation of the common core was “far worse” than implementation of Obamacare. Weingarten has argued that teachers have been insufficiently prepared to teach to the standards and that the tests for the standards are not ready to have consequences

attached to them, calling for a “moratorium” on attaching any stakes. In January 2014, this phenomenon boiled over in the state of New York. Citing “conversations where we’re all saying our members don’t see this going down a path that improves teaching and learning,” the board of the New York State United Teachers withdrew its support for the common core and gave a vote of no confidence in the state’s education commissioner, John King.

Ensuring Success

So what are the chances that the common core ultimately helps efforts to reform schools rather than harms them?

The oversight and governance challenge is a catch-22: any governing body that actually holds states’ feet to the fire will most likely drive pushback from state- and local-control advocates; any group that defers to those advocates will most likely be so powerless as to be ineffective. What’s more, these issues have been known to common core supporters for a long time now; their inaction seems to indicate that no one wants the hot potato.

Strides can be made on the infrastructure issues. Ultimately, technology can be a cost saver for schools and districts as they migrate away

from expensive paper textbooks. Yes, there are serious up-front costs, but it would appear that pushing back against improving technology would mean that states are simply being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission is attempting to reform E-Rate funding, the primary vehicle for subsidizing school bandwidth upgrades. Should that go through and funds be allocated to update bandwidth, many of these issues could be resolved.

To reduce the political noise on the right, the Department of Education could take clear and public steps away from the standards. ED could, for example, adopt the language from the House Republicans’ Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization bill that explicitly states that the federal government will not make future grants or regulatory relief contingent on adopting a particular set of standards.

Will these adjustments be enough? In *Implementation*, political scientists Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky encouraged those interested in assessing the likelihood that a policy will succeed to calculate the cumulative probability that all necessary decisions will be made correctly. I tried to run through what I thought were the core decisions for the common core to succeed and came up with 17 unique steps (see sidebar). When I published them, a state education chief took me to task

The Common Core Challenge

Ensuring that implementation of the common core does not derail existing efforts to improve schooling requires that at least 17 separate decisions be made correctly.

Professional Development

1. Teacher preparation institutions agree to teach prospective educators the common core.
2. Districts appropriate funding for new professional development resources.
3. State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) vet and select new professional development resources.
4. SEAs, LEAs, and individual schools pilot and check on the quality of new professional development resources.
5. SEAs, LEAs, and individual schools take new professional development resources to scale.

Technology

6. SEAs and LEAs select the level of technology to which professional development and student resources will be designed (current or next generation).
7. SEAs and LEAs accurately determine their existing technological capacity.
8. SEAs and LEAs accurately determine new technology needs.
9. State legislatures appropriate monies for hardware and internet infrastructure upgrades.
10. SEAs, LEAs, and individual schools determine whether to purchase new textbooks or use bridge texts.

Assessments and Accountability

11. SEAs select new assessments.
12. SEAs and LEAs pilot new assessments.
13. SEAs align new data with existing accountability systems and determine whether or not to use pre-common core testing data.
14. SEAs and LEAs use new data in useful ways to make cross school, district, and state comparisons.

Political Will

15. State leaders prepare the public for dip in test scores.
16. State leaders manage public opinion once test scores are made available.
17. State leaders use the new data constructively to inform political conversations.

SOURCE: "The Lay of the Land" in Frederick M. Hess and Michael Q. McShane (eds.), *Common Core Meets Education Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press), 2013.

for, in his opinion, drastically *undercounting* the number of decisions that had to be made. Fair enough.

So the question is, Can state-level bureaucrats, operating in a politically charged, cost-conscious environment without governing structures in place for support, be able to implement a radical overhaul of what K–12 students learn?

Conclusion

It may be that common core will usher in a new regime, with substantial benefits for student learning, that stops short of its advocates' ideal.

In one scenario, a large number of states may adopt the standards in name only, develop their own tests, and set their own proficiency cut scores. We've already seen Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania pull out of the consortia to develop their own tests, and more states could join them. If the standards are superior to those currently in place in those states, this is not the worst outcome. States can still benefit from the national marketplace for textbooks, professional development, and supplementary materials that should provide both higher-quality and lower-cost products for them without all of the baggage that participating in multistate consortia brings. Interstate comparisons or nationwide definitions of proficiency based on common standards might never materialize, but we do not have those now either.

Second, a number of states may drop out of the endeavor altogether, and the remaining coalition of states will form a more manageable group committed to the common core. Perhaps the common core is unwieldy at 45 states and the District of Columbia. It might work better if 10, 15, or 20 states with sufficient infrastructure and a hospitable political climate develop a governance model that all can buy into.

The rub, of course, is that the common core has been disruptive to teachers and students in every state that has adopted it. It has caused states to spend large amounts of money on new materials, new professional development, and new technology. In January 2014, for example, Maryland announced that it would cost more than \$100 million to get the state up to speed with technology for students to take the test, and even with upgrades, on testing days teachers and students might have to refrain from using e-mail or computers for elective courses to preserve bandwidth. Should the project shrink or become an in-name-only exercise, all of that time, all of that disruption, and all of that money will have been to purchase the accoutrements of yet another educational fad.

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