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# The Common Core

**One day each month**, hundreds of teachers, school leaders, and district officials in Kentucky meet to discuss issues regarding implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. They propose lessons, develop assessments, and pore over materials designed to help prepare other teachers in their home schools and districts to implement the standards.

The Kentucky meetings, which take place in eight regions that comprise about 20 school districts each, are only one effort the state has undertaken to help teachers make the common core standards an integral part of classroom practice. The state department of education also built an online portal called Kentucky's Continuous Instructional Improvement Technology System, which hosts lessons, tests, and curriculum materials. The state has also engaged its higher-education institutions to revamp assessments used for placement in first-year courses to align with the standards, and to redesign teacher-preparation programs.

Kentucky in 2012 took the controversial step of retooling its state test to align with the common core standards. As expected, proficiency levels dropped sharply from the previous year, when the state used an older test

## Takes Hold

based on earlier standards. But the apparent drop in scores did not provoke much of an outcry, because state officials and others had prepared parents and community members for the results. In 2013, performance improved.

While political battles over the common core standards have dominated the headlines, efforts like Kentucky's to help ensure that teachers are prepared to teach to them have garnered far less attention. And while Kentucky, the first to adopt the standards, is far ahead of most other states, these kinds of efforts are going on throughout the country.

To be sure, the road ahead for the standards remains rocky, and success is far from assured. The political battles remain and will likely intensify. The funding necessary for implementation is uncertain. And the quality of assessments and curriculum materials necessary to support implementation is not yet clear.

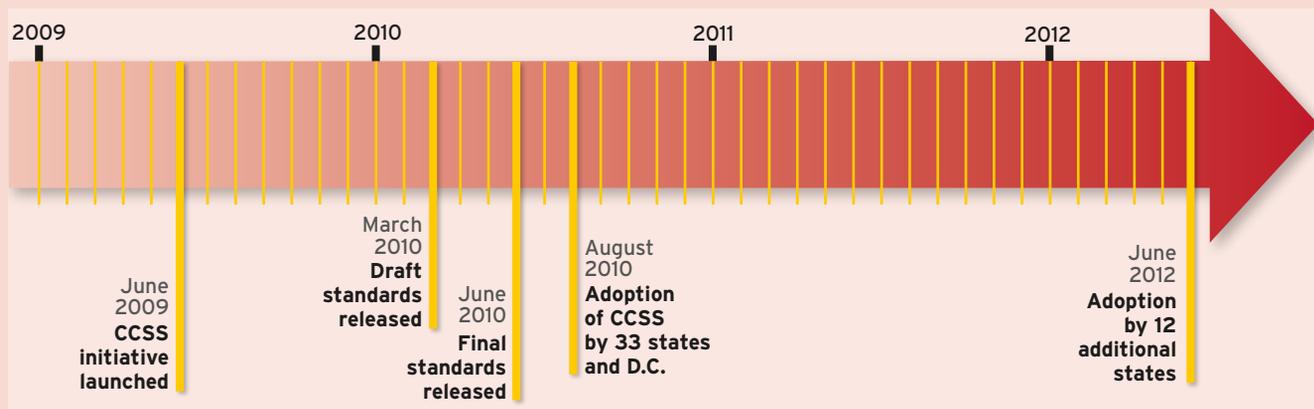
But the work already under way suggests that the common core standards are beginning to penetrate the classroom and will have an impact on teaching and learning.

## Implementation moves steadily forward

by ROBERT ROTHMAN

## Common Core Timeline (Figure 1)

Two years after the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released, they had been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.



NOTE: These figures do not include Minnesota, which in June 2010 adopted the common core standards for English language arts only.

### Standards Deviation

The first generation of standards-based reform, in the 1990s, had a decidedly mixed impact on instruction and student performance. In part, the mixed record reflects the quality of state standards, which varied widely and in many states was poor. In addition, implementation efforts often failed to have meaningful effects on classroom practice.

For example, in an in-depth study of nine Michigan districts in the early 1990s, James P. Spillane of Northwestern University found wide variations in how teachers interpreted and applied the standards. Some saw them as substantial changes in practice and made corresponding adjustments to their instruction, while others viewed them in a relatively superficial way, making few changes. There was little shift in student achievement. Variations in the classroom reflected the amount of support states and districts were able to provide to help teachers understand the standards and change practice accordingly. In the end, Spillane writes, implementation resembled the children's game of Telephone, in which the standards were whispered from the state capitol to classrooms, only to create a muddled message at the end of the line. The result was reflected in the title of his book: *Standards Deviation*.



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The common core standards are vulnerable to the same differences in interpretation that plagued the earlier round of standards reform. For example, a 2011 survey by William Schmidt of Michigan State University of mathematics teachers in 40 states found that, while the overwhelming majority of teachers had read the standards and liked them, some 80 percent said they were “pretty much the same” as previous state standards. Although some state standards are consistent with the common core, others are significantly different, suggesting that many teachers are understating the differences. In addition, a survey of English language arts classrooms published by the Fordham Institute found that most elementary-school teachers, at least in the early stages of common core implementation, assigned books based on students’ abilities, rather than grade-level complexity, as the standards state.

Yet by all accounts, the efforts under way to make teachers aware of the standards and the instructional shifts they imply are unprecedented in their scope and intensity. And because the standards have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, cross state and national efforts, which could not have happened when each state developed its own standards, are now possible (see Figure 1).

## Where We Are

A survey administered in the spring of 2013 by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) provides some indication of the status of implementation at that time. Based on self-reports by state officials, the survey found that, in 30 states, curricula aligned to the common core were already being taught in at least some districts or grade levels. All states surveyed had developed and disseminated plans for implementation; nearly all had conducted analyses comparing the common core standards to previous state standards; 29 had developed curriculum guides or materials aligned to the common core; and 18 had revised assessments to reflect the standards (another 15 planned to do so in the 2013–14 school year).

In addition, the survey found, nearly all states had developed and disseminated professional-development materials around the common core and had carried out statewide professional-development initiatives. And 33 states had worked with institutes of higher education to redesign teacher-preparation programs to reflect the standards.

As might be expected, funding cuts have affected states' implementation activities, although not as much as some observers might have feared. Although 20 states had reported decreased or stable budgets for K–12 education and 28 reported cuts or level funding for state education agencies, only 12 states reported cutting back on common core implementation because of budget constraints. Six states said they reduced technology expenditures, six reduced or eliminated statewide meetings on the standards, and five cut technical assistance to districts and schools.

States have taken different approaches to implementation. Some, like Kentucky, have sought to implement the standards statewide and developed a regional infrastructure to provide professional development, materials, and support. Colorado, meanwhile, decided to pilot implementation in 13 districts, with support from a local organization, the Colorado Legacy Foundation, which provided funding and staff. The goal is to learn from those districts and apply the lessons statewide in 2013–14.

New York chose a different, and more controversial, path. The state contracted with private, nonprofit organizations to develop new curricula aligned to the common core, developed a web site that included sample lessons and professional-development materials, and then developed a new assessment tied to the standards and administered it in the spring of 2013—two years before most states had planned to put new tests in place. The results, which showed far lower rates of proficiency than the

prior test, which was tied to the previous state standards, provoked an outcry from teachers and parents, who complained that schools and students had not been adequately prepared for it. In large part because of this controversy, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said at a November 2013 workshop sponsored by the Education Writers Association that the implementation of the Common Core State Standards was worse than the rollout of the troubled Affordable Care Act.

## Cross State and National Efforts

While state-level efforts are under way, national organizations and firms are also engaged in developing materials and preparing educators to revamp instruction and supervision around the common core standards. The fact that the standards have been adopted by so many states makes possible cross state partnerships that could not have taken place when each state developed its own standards.

The most extensive cross state effort to implement the common core standards is being undertaken by the two state consortia that are developing the assessments to measure student performance against them. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded \$330 million to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) to develop assessments aligned to the common core in English language arts and mathematics for grades 3 through 8 and high school. PARCC currently consists of 19 states and received \$170 million initially, and SBAC includes 24 states (one state belongs to both) and received \$160 million.

In addition to developing the assessments, the two consortia are supporting states and districts in the implementation of the common core standards. To support these efforts, the U.S. Department of Education awarded each of the consortia an additional \$16 million in early 2011.

As part of its efforts, SBAC is creating a digital library of curriculum frameworks, sample instructional units, and formative assessment tools. The consortium also conducts professional development to help teachers understand the assessment system and how to score test items. Similarly, PARCC plans to develop instructional and curriculum tools for teachers, although its work was put off a year in order to allow the consortium to concentrate on developing its assessment system.

Other cross state efforts are under way as well. In one notable effort, a group of universities,



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community colleges, and school districts in 30 states have formed the Mathematics Teacher Education Partnership to redesign teacher-preparation programs aligned with the common core standards. Funded in part by the National Science Foundation, the partners include 68 institutions of higher education and 87 school districts.

Private groups are also working to develop materials and provide professional development. Student Achievement Partners, a New York-based organization founded by three of the lead writers of the common core standards, David Coleman, Susan Pimental, and Jason Zimba, received an \$18 million grant from the GE Foundation to create “immersion institutes” to familiarize teachers with the standards and to create a storehouse of materials for them to use in their instruction.

Publishers are also moving to develop new materials based on the standards. One of the largest such efforts is being undertaken by Pearson, a major publisher based in London. With input from members of teams that wrote the standards, Pearson is creating a series of K–12 curriculum materials that will be delivered completely online, through tablets like the iPad. They will include projects for students to complete, texts and digital materials to support students in conducting their projects, and assessments to check student understanding. The curriculum is being piloted in Los Angeles in 2013–14 and has created some controversy because of the cost of the tablets and security of the software. The firm has received support for this effort from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; as a condition of this support, some of the materials will be available to all schools free of charge.

Other publishers are likely to follow suit, because the 45 states that have adopted the common core standards represent a near-national market. To help encourage the development of materials aligned with the standards, a group of 20 large urban districts that are part of the Council of the Great City Schools banded together to press publishers to create materials that match the standards’ expectations. The districts are hoping their leverage can influence the development of better products, but their power has yet to be seen.

### Looming Challenges

While these efforts appear promising, states and districts face significant challenges in implementing the common core standards. One is

finding the funds for implementation. Although the CEP survey found that most states have been able to weather funding cutbacks, the availability of resources will likely have an effect on implementation.

Other challenges also loom. While the common core standards are creating opportunities for the development of new materials and professional-development offerings, not all of these products and services will be truly aligned to the standards or be of high quality. How can educators make informed decisions about the quality of curriculum materials?

The cross state partnerships made possible by the common core are offering one solution. Under the auspices of Achieve, states have developed a tool, known as EQUiP (Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products) that enables teachers to evaluate materials for quality and for alignment to the standards. After using that tool, teachers in New York State selected mathematics materials from Common Core, a private organization whose name predated the standards, and chose Expeditionary Learning materials for English language arts. More such efforts to evaluate available materials are likely.

Another challenge concerns the assessments that the PARCC and SBAC consortia are developing to measure student performance against the standards. As they build their assessments, the consortia are working hard to make sure that they accurately reflect the new standards. Because of the importance of tests in state accountability systems, when there is a discrepancy between tests and standards, teachers tend to place a greater emphasis on what is tested. In the 1990s, many state tests were poorly aligned to state standards, so the influence of standards was reduced, as Spillane’s story of Michigan showed.

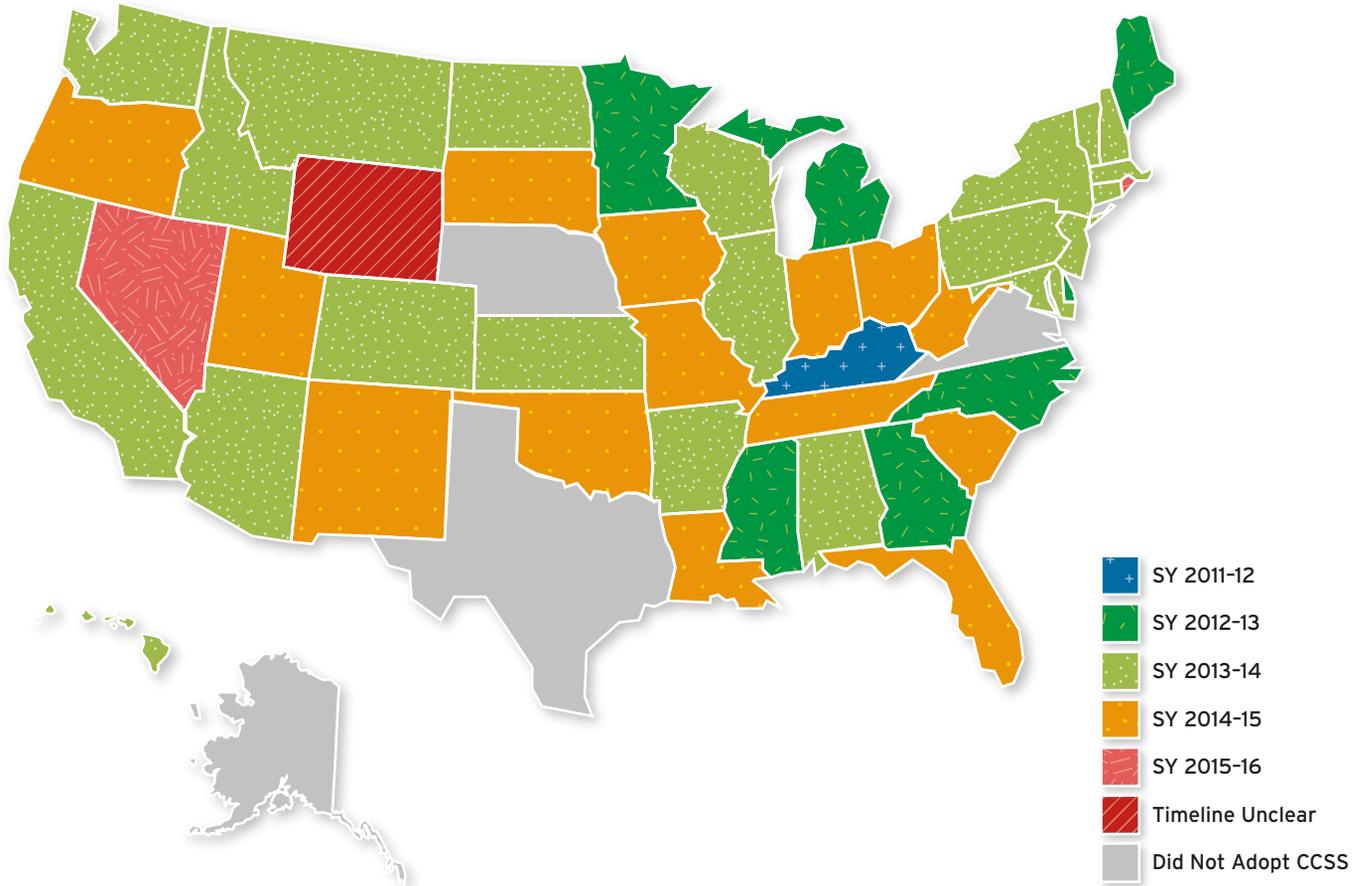
Both consortia face challenges that could limit their ambitious aims, however. One challenge is financial. The kinds of assessments the consortia are developing, which rely more heavily than most state tests on open-ended tasks and student writing, are more expensive to develop than many current state tests. The estimated cost for PARCC is \$29.50 per pupil, about the median of what PARCC states currently pay for tests. But that means half the states would have to pay more for PARCC. SBAC’s tests, meanwhile, are expected to cost \$22.50 per pupil (\$27.30 if states buy the formative and interim assessments as well). That is more than what one-third of what that consortium’s states currently spend on testing.



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## Teaching to the New Standards (Figure 2)

*Expected year of full implementation, state by state.*



**NOTE:** Minnesota adopted the Common Core English Language Arts standards only.

**SOURCE:** Council of Chief State School Officers

States that spend less for tests than the consortia assessments are likely to cost might be leery of increasing spending. And, in fact, a few states, such as Georgia and Oklahoma, have pulled out of the consortia, indicating their desire to seek less-costly alternatives, such as a proposed assessment package being developed by ACT. If states end up using assessments that are less closely aligned to the standards than the consortia's assessments are intended to be, what will that mean for full implementation of the standards?

### Political Challenges

The concern over public support for new assessments points to a broader political challenge states face in implementing the common core standards. Although the standards won broad approval among educators and public officials and were

adopted by nearly all the states, the support was not necessarily widespread among the public at large. A PDK/Gallup poll conducted in 2013, a time when controversy over the common core was rising, found that nearly two-thirds of Americans had not heard of the standards. And, it found, among those who had heard of the standards, only 41 percent said they would make the nation more competitive globally.

Teachers, meanwhile, are very familiar with the standards and support them, although they are wary about implementation. A survey by the American Federation of Teachers in 2013 found that 75 percent of that union's members supported the standards, although many teachers feared that they were not prepared to teach them.

Nonetheless, a separate poll conducted by Achieve found that a minority of voters—28 percent—express opposition to the standards, and there have been attempts to scuttle or

reverse adoption of the standards. In many cases, this opposition reflects the mistaken impression that the Common Core State Standards Initiative was a federal effort, sponsored by President Obama rather than by the states' governors and education officials. Reflecting this view, legislators in several states, such as South Carolina and Utah, proposed bills that would have given state legislatures a vote in standards adoption (the standards were for the most part adopted by state boards of education) or would have rescinded the adoptions outright. All of these efforts had failed as of December 2013. And in Alabama, the newly elected governor, Robert J. Bentley, asked the state board of education to reconsider its vote to adopt the standards; that effort failed as well.

Some opposition efforts had partial success. In Indiana, a former teacher named Glenda Ritz in 2012 defeated the incumbent state superintendent of public instruction, Tony Bennett, who had been a strong supporter of the common core standards. Ritz and her backers opposed Bennett on many grounds, including his positions in favor of teacher evaluation and vouchers, but she also attracted some support from conservatives who had opposed his stance on the standards. The legislature subsequently passed a measure that would "pause" implementation of the standards and moved toward rescinding them.

In addition, the Michigan legislature in 2013 prohibited spending on implementation of the standards. Following a series of hearings, however, the legislature reversed course later that year and allowed spending to go forward.

The Michigan experience suggests a way that the standards can withstand political opposition. During the hearings, teachers and principals expressed their support for the standards, showing legislators that the standards had a groundswell of grassroots support. In addition, the educators convinced legislators that the implementation of the standards was well on the way, and that any effort to turn back would be confusing to teachers—and expensive.

Supporters of the common core standards have also been concerned that the base of support could erode when the first results are released from the new assessments designed to measure student performance against them. Because these assessments are likely to include some tasks that many students had little exposure to prior to 2010, and because the expectations for student performance represented by the standards are considerably higher than in many states' previous standards, the test scores are expected to be lower than in the past. As noted above, Kentucky got a first taste

of this experience in 2012, when it released scores that were as much as 40 percent lower than the previous year's, and New York State experienced the same jolt the following year. Many standards advocates fear that what appears to be a drop in student performance might convince some policymakers to abandon the effort.

### The True Test

The true test of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, and of public support for it, will come over the next few years, as states carry through with their implementation plans (see Figure 2). Will test scores rise over time? Will students be better prepared for college and careers?

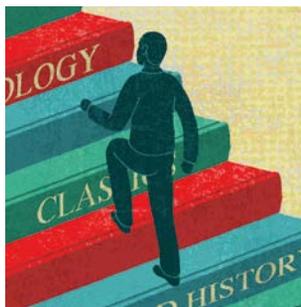
Judging by the amount of activity that has taken place since the adoption of the standards, and that is likely to continue over the next few years, states are making a strong bet that this round of standards setting will produce better results than the previous round in the 1990s. The level of activity states are engaged in, the possibilities offered by technology and cross

state collaborations, and the extraordinary effort to develop new assessments all suggest that the common core standards might generate some real changes in classroom instruction. And, they further suggest, these changes will be widespread, and will lead to real improvements in student learning, as Kentucky's rise in scores from 2012 to 2013 suggests.

But even if they are successful, the organizations that created the common core standards need to look to the future. At some point—not too soon, they insist—the standards will need to be revised, to reflect new research on student learning and evidence about their validity in predicting college and career readiness. That means that the organizations need to develop and oversee a research agenda and formalize a governance structure to guide a future revision.

In the meantime, states are implementing the common core standards because they are convinced that it is in their best interest, and in the interest of the nation as a whole, for young people to develop the knowledge and skills the standards embody. Despite the challenges, states and districts are attempting to make it happen in tens of thousands of schools across the country.

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