

THE COMMON GOOD?

The debate over common core standards for K-12 education is heating up.

BY GARRY BOULARD

As he contemplates the move to create common core standards across the country, Texas Representative Rob Eissler has advice for his fellow legislators in the other 49 states.

“I think Nancy Reagan said it best a while back,” says Eissler, referring to the former first lady’s “Just Say No,” anti-drug campaign of the 1980s.

Eissler’s position is a sort of line in the sand between those who see common standards as another intrusion by the federal government in state education plans and those who advocate for them as a way to lift the nation’s achievement.

Although the idea of common standards at the state level has long been talked about by educators and policymakers, the movement received its most significant support last year. That was when the Common Core States Standards Initiative was announced, promoting the same set of standards for use in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K-12.

The initiative won the backing of the National Governors Association as well as the Council of Chief State School Officers. Governors and chief state school officers from 48 states promised state-led efforts to develop core standards that will be based on research.

In addition, the initiative committed to align standards with college and work expectations, with an eye toward making education in America competitive internationally.

Hawaii Representative Roy Takumi points to the initiative’s decision to adopt core standards for K-12 mathematics as a step toward

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that goal. “There is not a whole lot of variation, in my opinion, between algebra one students. Yet we pride ourselves to a fault that the Mississippi version of the standards embedded in algebra one are more than they might have in Minnesota. That would be a laughable argument in South Korea or Japan or Chile.”

A COMMON DEBATE

Those arguments don’t hold water for Eissler and other opponents of the movement.

“You have to dig deep into what such standards are all about,” says Eissler. “What are they going to emphasize? Will they fit your state? Will they fit the kids in your state? People may say that these kinds of standards





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Until such questions are answered, Eissler recommends lawmakers across the country get their states to opt out of both the federal Race to the Top competition and the broader common core standards movement.

Eissler was delighted earlier this year when Texas Governor Rick Perry announced his state would not submit an application for education funding under the Race to the Top program, which requires states to adopt common standards to apply.

“If Washington were truly concerned about funding education with solutions that match



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TEXAS



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ROY TAKUMI
HAWAII



SENATOR
STEPHEN SALAND
NEW YORK

local challenges,” Perry said, “they would make the money available to the states with no strings attached.”

New York Senator Stephen Saland agrees. “That’s the first argument so many of us have against common standards—Washington is using money as a form of coercion,” he says, referring to the \$4.3 billion given to the Race to the Top program last year through the federal stimulus bill.

“To do that sort of thing during a time when the states have been struggling to get through this recession is, to me, not fair,” he says. “It’s a little bit like holding out a steak for someone who is standing in a soup line. And in devastatingly difficult times, the lure of money coming from the feds can be very intoxicating.”

But Vermont Governor Jim Douglas, the immediate past chairman of the National Governors Association, says common standards are crucial if students in the United States are going to compete effectively with their peers around the world. “Common standards that allow us to internationally benchmark our students’ performance with other top countries have the potential to bring about a real and meaningful transformation of our education system to the benefit of all Americans.”

continued on page 15

STANDARD BEARER

Education Secretary Arne Duncan answers questions about the federal role in education policy.



Q **UESTION:** What is your take, so far, on the state responses to Race to the Top?

A **NSWER:** The first round applications for Race to the Top were great. And in the second round, they're even better. This is real courage. What's been most impressive to me is that nobody is defending the status quo. Everyone knows that we have to educate our way to a better economy. There isn't a state whose drop-out rate is low enough and whose graduation rates are high enough and where we have enough high school graduates actually prepared to do college work.

Q: Delaware and Tennessee were the two states that won Race to the Top funding in the first go-around. What did they do right?

A: Delaware and Tennessee had just breathtaking reform in all the areas and had an extraordinary buy-in from every different type of constituency: the business community, political leadership, union members, teachers, boards. There were phenomenal reform and tremendous consensus behind it. And that, for us, is the best of all worlds, where there is a total willingness to challenge the status quo, and real depth of commitment on that work.

Q: There has been criticism regarding the link between a state adopting common standards and being eligible for Race to the Top funding. Some have said it smacks of coercion. Is it?

A: What we have been doing in far too many places is effectively lying to children and lying to families. We've been telling them that they are on track to be ready for long-term education success, when in fact they are not even close. They are absolutely underprepared. So this is about raising the

When Arne Duncan was deputy chief of staff and then chief executive officer of the Chicago public school system student achievement levels in the nation's third largest school district rose.

His reputation as a leader who was not afraid to address tough issues won him the attention of Barack Obama years before he ran for president. The two played basketball and talked education policy.

Obama nominated him to be secretary of education and said he admired Duncan's willingness to try new things. One of the best known of those new things is the \$4.5 billion Race to the Top competitive grant program, designed to develop innovative state education reform. Race to the Top rewards states for, among other things, turning around low-performing schools, adopting standards to help prepare students for college or the workplace, and recruiting and retaining teachers and principals where they are needed most. The secretary spoke with State Legislatures about the Education Department's initiative.

bar and trying to guarantee that students who graduate from high school truly are college- and career-ready. This is right for children, it is right for education, and it is the only way that states can build a healthy and vibrant long-term economy.

Q: So a state can't apply for Race to the Top funding without adopting common core standards?

A: That would not be a race to the top. It's a perpetuation of mediocrity. We mean what we say. This is about leading the country to where we need to go. Where you have dummed down standards, that is not good. It is not good at any level. The standards are never going to be federal standards. All the leadership is being provided at the state level. Which is exactly where it should be, by governors and state school chief officers.

Q: Some state legislators have said that they are being bypassed in this process. Do you think they are?

A: We all are pushing very hard. We all have to work together. We all have to collaborate in very different ways and move out of our comfort zones. I have had repeated conference calls with state legislators. I met with state legislators when they met together nationally [at NCSL's 2009 Fall Forum]. Their voice and their moral leadership on this issue is hugely important to me personally and, I think, absolutely critical to the long-term success and sustainability of these reforms.

Q: Do you anticipate support for the common standards will drop off after the November elections?

A: I am happy to hear any voices. But this, again, is about what is right for the children in every state, what's right for making their public education systems as strong as possible. And ultimately the only way we can build healthy and vibrant state economies and attract businesses to stay in a state or move into a state is if they have great educational systems.

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U.S. VS. THE WORLD

The international competition argument has been of one the strongest for common standards.

“We think it’s a good idea because we see our country being compared to the performance of other countries on the education stage. It is going to be very difficult for us to be globally competitive if we continue to have 50 sets of standards when we go off against countries that have only one,” says Dan Domenech, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, a group that backs the standards movement.

Domenech acknowledges that, despite the announced backing of 48 governors and chief state school officers, some states may still be inclined to go their own way and follow the example of Texas. Alaska became the second state to do so earlier this year.

“I don’t foresee in one fell swoop all 50 states saying that they will absolutely sign on and embrace the standards,” Domenech says. “But what we are hoping to see is that a significant core of states will adopt such standards. And by significant core, I mean 20 to 30 states.”

As of Aug. 2, 34 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the common standards.

That core, says Domenech, will “put tremendous pressure on the other states that have not come on board.”

Parents in the hold-out states may end up serving as pressure points for the movement.

“The parents in those states may say, ‘My child is doing very well.’ But that would be according to the standards of that one state. How would that child compare to that group of 30 states over there?” asks Domenech.



“I think that would create the kind of public pressure that would eventually lead to every state being a part of the common core effort.”

Hawaii’s Takumi agrees, noting his state is the only one in the country with a single school board, district and superintendent.

“In that context, the notion of having common course standards resonates with me,” he says. “Hawaii is not competing against Mississippi, and Michigan is not competing against Texas. To use a sports metaphor, these are all just inter-squad scrimmages. The real game is against Finland and South Korea.”

INTERNATIONAL RED FLAG

Not every education expert, however, finds the international competition argument persuasive.

Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, senior fellow and director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institute, thinks it has holes.

“There are certainly other countries that do better than us on international examinations like PISA [Program for International Student Assessment],” he says. “But there are other countries that do worse than us that have common standards. Canada does quite well and does not have common standards;

they have provincial standards. So there are a variety of ways to get things done.”

He does think there are lessons U.S. educators can learn from other countries. “These are things that have to do with the coherence of the system, ultimately pointing toward the curriculum in the classroom and training around that curriculum.”

Simply saying, however, “if we have common standards we are going to be better because Finland has common standards and it’s better, and Singapore has common standards and it’s better, misrepresents the evidence,” Whitehurst says.

Despite such arguments, backers point out that the common standards movement is being pushed primarily by governors and state school chiefs and is not shaping up as a federal mandate, even though it is supported by the president and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

“Those who are leading the way have made it very clear that they are doing this on their own and are not involved with the federal government at all,” says Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Education Policy.

He says cost savings might be another motivation. The governors “most likely prefer to have just one test developed by someone else on the theory that it’s cheaper that way, and they don’t have to spend their own money.”

But such savings might well be offset, at least initially, by states having to line up their curricula, digital media and textbooks with the new standards.

“Will money from Washington really cover everything the states might be required to do if they adopt common standards?” asks Oregon Representative Betty Komp.

“We don’t know the answer,” she says. “But I remember when the federal special education law came through in the 1970s and Washington said it would give us money. It did, but at no point has the money we received covered the costs.”

The same is true with No Child Left Behind, she says. “It has cost every state more money than what the federal government has given us to meet the requirements.”

New York’s Saland says it could lead to “a system in which you will either have the feds controlling and providing funding for education—and we know the latter is extremely unlikely—or the feds will co-opt local and state control as they have substantially done with [No Child Left Behind], making local

school districts and state education departments administrative entities of the federal education department.”

FEDERAL PRESSURE

States may also be wary of what Eissler describes as a cavalier Washington approach to Race to the Top funding. This spring, the U.S. Department of Education announced that only two states—Delaware and Tennessee—would get grants in the first phase of Race to the Top competition.

Delaware, the department said, will receive

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some \$100 million and Tennessee \$500 million to be used for comprehensive school reform in the next four years.

Forty states and the District of Columbia applied for the grants.

“How fair is that?” asks Eissler. “Was it really a contest? No, it was a bribe. They said ‘We’ll give you some money for applying.’ And then they gave it to just two states and fooled all the rest.”

Education Secretary Duncan says the reason Delaware and Tennessee won Race to the Top backing was because “they had just breathtaking reform in all the areas and had an extraordinary buy-in from every type of constituency.”

But even Domenech agrees the way Race to the Top funding was offered and ultimately awarded has been troubling. “It does smack of coercion,” he says. “And I think that sort of thing creates anxiety on the part of states and localities.”

Even so, Demenech says his organization remains committed to common core standards as long as they are “developed collab-



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oratively by the states, with each state voluntarily adopting them. We don’t want to see the federal government developing and imposing standards.”

Takumi also doesn’t like the idea of the standards becoming a Washington-imposed set of requirements. “There is always the potential of the feds taking over anything, but I remain hopeful because, again, the people who have until now been behind this, such as the governors, are grounded in the states.

“States obviously should have the right to determine the educational destiny of their children,” he says. “But I would ask my colleagues and state legislators, again, to realize that we are one nation. We are competing against other nations. We are not competing against other states. That kind of thinking is a trap.”

As for the argument that state lawmakers have so far been bypassed by the common standards movement, Texas Senator Leticia Van De Putte says state leaders still have an important role to play.

“I don’t know of any state where the governor has carte blanche to spend money,” she says. “The legislatures are still the ones who allocate funds for texts and curriculums.”

The challenge confronting legislatures, adds Van De Putte, is whether or not to take actions that would prompt their states to opt out of a process that is well underway.

“Legislators may be stuck with two choices: Getting your ticket punched or getting off the platform.”

CHECK OUT a discussion of common standards with Chester E. Finn Jr., a senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute at www.ncsl.org/magazine.