

Challenged to the Core

Lawmakers face the daunting task of enacting the laws and coming up with the funds needed to bring the Common Core State Standards to life.



BY JULIE DAVIS BELL AND
DANIEL THATCHER

It is either one of the most significant state education reforms ever or just another short-term fix, depending on who you ask. But one thing is for sure, most lawmakers would say they are tackling some of the most sweeping and complicated reforms for grades K-12 they've ever attempted.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—fully adopted by 45 states between 2010 and 2011—now place legislatures squarely in the middle of the most important next step. They must decide which reforms and laws are necessary to meet the initiatives' requirements.

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A Movement Begins

The notion of having national academic standards has been bandied about for years. But it wasn't until 2009 when the National Governors Association's Center on Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers coalesced their members' support around an initiative to develop voluntary, state-led standards that the idea took root. Minus the participation of Alaska and Texas, 48 states committed to the idea of the Common Core State Standards and began deliberations in 2010 over whether to adopt them.

Advocates argued that in this era of increased global competitiveness and family mobility, the country needed common academic metrics and goals that all students—whether living in Las Alamos or the Bronx—must measure up to and master.

"We must insist on standards that will prepare our high-school graduates for the demanding challenges they will face," wrote former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and former New York

The Basics on the Standards

Academic standards define the knowledge and skills students should have at various grade levels. The common core standards initiative is an attempt by states to correlate their previously inconsistent academic goals—so that what Sarah in Sacramento is expected to know in third grade is the same as what Sara in St. Petersburg is learning.

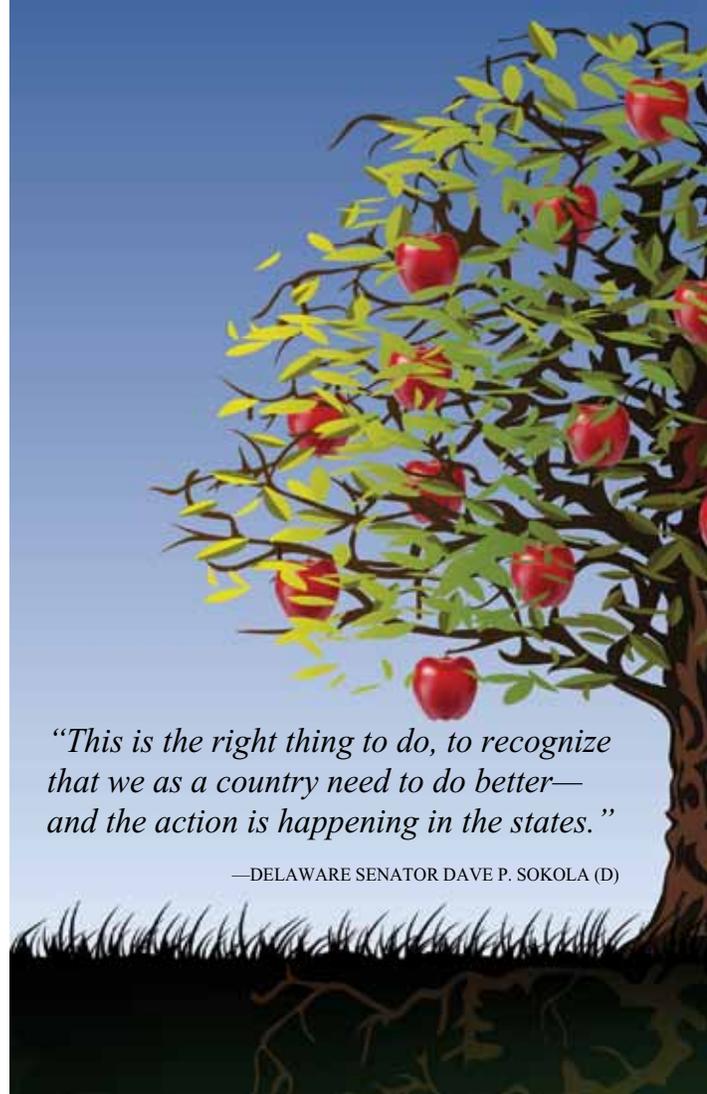
The new standards were built upon the strengths of current state standards, and were written with the goals of measuring up against international standards, being rigorous in content and capable of preparing all students for a career or college, specifically,

- ◆ Math and English standards have been developed for each grade from kindergarten to eight and for every two years in high school.
- ◆ Science standards are being developed now and will be added later.
- ◆ There are no plans to develop standards in any other subjects, so states may continue using their own in these areas.
- ◆ States may augment the common standards with up to 15 percent of their own state-specific standards.

A STANDARD EXAMPLE

To illustrate one common core standard in reading, third-grade students, under the “Phonics and Word Recognition” category, must be able to:

- ◆ Identify and know the meaning of the most common prefixes and derivational suffixes.
- ◆ Decode words with common Latin suffixes.
- ◆ Decode multi-syllable words.
- ◆ Read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words.



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Delaware

Schools Chancellor Joel Klein in an op-ed for The Wall Street Journal in 2011. “Recognizing our great need for more rigorous academics, state leaders and educators have come together to create model content standards.”

Soon, business leaders joined the chorus of supporters. “Fifty different sets of standards make no sense,” Craig Barrett, former CEO of Intel Corp., argued in The Wall Street Journal. “Common education standards are essential for producing the educated work force America needs to remain globally competitive.”

To date, all but Alaska, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia have adopted the new standards.

Cautious Optimism

Today, the core standards movement enjoys wide bipartisan support. “This is the right thing to do, to recognize that we as a country need to do better—and the action is happening in the states,” says Delaware Senator Dave P. Sokola (D). Members of NCSL’s bipartisan Education Committee voted to support adop-

tion of the standards as long as they remain voluntary and state-led.

Other lawmakers aren’t so optimistic, voicing a concern that the legislative branch has been left in the dark on the pace and progress of the standards. “I am not getting any information about this from our state education department,” Wisconsin Senator Luther Olsen (R) says. “Legislators are not getting briefed by our state commissioners about what is happening and what is going to be needed.”

Even though the standards were developed at the state level, some policymakers are concerned the federal government will insert its influence into the project, causing states and localities to lose some control over education and their state standards.

Minnesota Representative Sondra Erickson (R) is among the skeptical. “Mostly I am concerned about state authority,” she says. “We may be disappointed in the end that we all agreed to



Representative
Sondra
Erickson (R)
Minnesota



Senator
Luther Olsen (R)
Wisconsin

The Timeline

2012 to 2013

States have a lot to do to prepare their school systems for the Common Core Standards. In the next two years, state legislatures will:

1. Decide whether to participate in one or both consortia developing assessments.
2. Review statutes and regulations and amend or adopt

new laws if needed.

3. Support the development of new curricula, professional development programs, models to track student progress, interactive reporting of test results and teacher evaluation systems.
4. Procure the technology needed for the assessments.

Higher education officials will:

1. Align admission requirements to the standards.
2. Correlate freshmen year core curriculum to the standards.
3. Review teacher preparation programs.



do the same thing.”

The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged states' efforts to establish standards by awarding additional points to those applying for Race to the Top grants and No Child Left Behind waivers if they have adopted and are working on the common core standards. The federal department also has awarded \$330 million to two groups developing assessments based on the standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness in College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.

“I feel better about the common standards than I did at first,” says West Virginia Senator Robert H. Plymale (D). “We’re making them work for West Virginia. I am less concerned about federal intrusion now, and it is forcing some very good conversations in the states about what we have to do to improve student achievement.”



*Senator
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Assessment Help

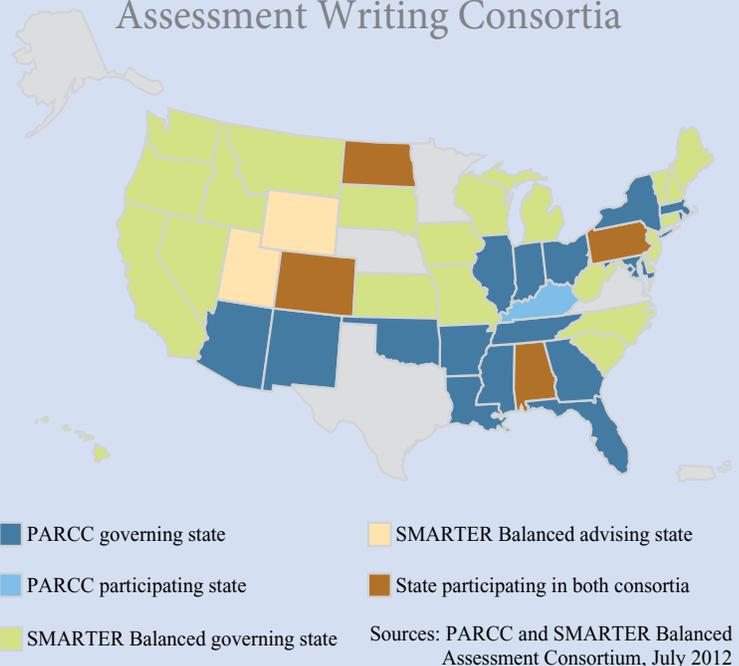
Most states are taking advantage of help from two groups developing the assessments for the new standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness in College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.

By joining a consortium, states have more control over the development of the tests, and by working together and sharing resources, they can save on costs.

There will be some differences in the assessments each group produces—from the technology required to administer them to the frequency they are given—but both have pledged to maintain open digital libraries of tests, tools and resources—even for non-participating states.

This is one of the features of the standards that most excites Delaware Senator Dave P. Sokola (D). “As a small state, we spend a disproportionate amount of money on test development and we are going to be able to realize significant cost-savings.”

State Participation in the Two Assessment Writing Consortia



A Colossal Task

Although 26 of the current governors and 22 current chief state school officers were not in office when their states agreed to the standards, they—along with school leaders, teachers and state legislators—still must get involved in the specific nuts and bolts of getting them established. Like conductors of an orchestra, states will need to direct myriad moving policy parts—from curriculum and textbooks to teaching and assessments—to fit

School districts will:

1. Begin developing curriculum and designing instruction based on the standards.

2014

School districts will:

1. Finish writing curriculum and designing class instruction.
2. Pilot individual test items.
3. Phase in course assessments.

2015

1. Teachers must administer the new end-of-year assessments in the spring.
2. Schools must report the results of the end-of-year assessments.

An International Comparison

The common core standards movement was bolstered by not-so-great test results from American students on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment in 2009.

Where U.S. Student Scores Ranked Compared With the Top 10 Countries

Rank	Country	Reading	Rank	Country	Math
	Shanghai-China	556		Shanghai-China	600
	Korea	539		Singapore	562
	Finland	536		Hong Kong-China	555
	Hong Kong-China	533		Korea	546
	Singapore	526		Chinese Taipei	543
	Canada	524		Finland	541
	New Zealand	521		Liechtenstein	536
	Japan	520		Switzerland	534
	Australia	515		Japan	529
	Netherlands	508		Canada	527
17th	United States	500	31st	United States	487

Note: PISA tests 15-year-olds worldwide on core competencies.
Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database



together, work and harmonize.

"I'm concerned that by trying to do everything at once we are going to implode, especially when state legislators have not been party to this from the beginning," says Wisconsin Senator Olsen.

"It's overwhelming," agrees Idaho Senator John W. Goedde (R).

If done correctly, advocates say, harmonizing existing policies with the standards will equip teachers with the tools they need to guide students to reach the new standards, which in most states are tougher than any previous state ones. But do states have the resources to provide teachers with the professional development they'll need to teach the new standards? Senator Sokola says this is a huge "capacity building" challenge for states. "You hear that 90 percent of teachers think the standards are a good idea, but only 25 percent feel they are ready for them."

The standards present lawmakers with a variety of challenges and opportunities in adapting the program statewide, and usually require changes to a number of policies or statutes. Legislators want to make sure the new assessments fit within their states' existing frameworks while they:

- ◆ Set high benchmarks for new curricula aligned to the standards.
- ◆ Support ongoing professional development for teachers and school leaders.
- ◆ Require rigorous teacher preparation programs in state colleges.
- ◆ Participate in one of the state consortia developing assess-



Senator
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(R)
Idaho

ments to ensure they align with specific state needs.

- ◆ Adapt teacher evaluations to the new, tougher assessments, which might require revisiting recently enacted changes that include student performance in teacher accountability measures.
- ◆ Connect K-12 assessments to higher education entrance standards.
- ◆ Establish and fund an adequate statewide collection and analyses of test score data.
- ◆ Ensure state-of-the-art technology is available as needed to teach and test the standards.

Cost Concerns

But by far the biggest concern lawmakers have, according to a recent NCSL survey, is costs.

"My biggest concern is how much all this is going to cost," says Oklahoma Senator John W. Ford (R). "We know we have to pay for things. Where do we take the money from?"

Others are concerned that the costly technology necessary—from broadband access to updated software—is far from adequate in many of their schools and school districts.

With all the pieces that must fall into place before student testing begins in 2015, the timetable is vexing. "To pass anything I need 50 percent of all members to vote for it and the governor to sign it and we don't meet again until January," says Iowa Representative Greg Forristall (R). "We just did major education reform last session and it is really hard."

Despite the challenges, some states are forging ahead. "We were one of the first states to adopt the common core standards," says West Virginia Delegate Mary M. Poling (D). "We've been informed by our superintendent that West Virginia standards had already been revised and are more rigorous than the common core standards."

Professional development opportunities for adopting the common core standards into class-



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room teaching and customizing the standards for West Virginia were part of legislation passed last year. “West Virginia’s Next Generation Content Standards and Assessment are well underway,” Poling says.

The Last Detail

The final challenge will be garnering support from students and parents. Clear and ongoing communication will be key. Explaining the goals of the program—as well as why the state and nation need a new, common set of standards—is vital.

The going could be rough. When the new program’s first round of test scores are released, many policymakers are preparing for a significant public backlash. The tougher standards and more sophisticated assessments will likely result in significantly lower student scores, at least at first. Teachers, principals, legislators and governors will have their hands full explaining the test results, and why, by setting the bar higher, students appear less prepared for college or a career than they did before.

SL ONLINE

Learn more about the common standards at www.ncsl.org/magazine.