

Chapter 4

Common Core State Standards: The Promise for College and Career Ready Students in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Following the National Education Summit in 2000, the National Governors Association and the Council for Chief State School Officers proposed the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts. The rationale is to provide a consistent core curriculum for all schools in the United States. Each state has opportunity to contribute to the rigor, clarity, and specificity of the standards. Incentives for states to implement the national curriculum are identified in the Blueprint for ESEA, a federal initiative to implement education reforms. Policy makers and educators agree that achievement gaps between students in the U.S. and other higher performing countries must be closed. In addition, our children must be prepared for college classrooms and globally competitive careers. This chapter provides the history of standards-based education reform, the pros and cons of a nationally standardized curriculum, and current progress in implementation of Common Core State Standards.

INTRODUCTION

There are many views on how to achieve the reforms needed to improve our education system. Federal and state agencies, as well as national and international assessment groups report on the need to close the achievement gaps between various groups of children within the U.S. All the while there is growing alarm at our recent loss in international rankings through tests such as PISA and TIMM (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). With the growing concerns about

declining scores, many policy-makers propose a common core curriculum at either state or federal level. The purpose would be to ensure consistent, rigorous standards that would help all children in all regions be successful. No Child Left Behind has been controversial, but the mandates coming from this legislation have been successful in the adoption of individual state standards in an effort to add rigor to classroom instruction (Egnor, 2003). What policy-makers and educators do not agree on is the degree of quality in the core curriculum, one that addresses both breadth and depth of content. This has led to continuing debate on state versus federal control. In addition to the question of who

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4249-2.ch004

will have the final say in what we teach our children, there are serious questions about implementation, accountability, and sustainability of a common core curriculum for all states. As of this writing, all but four states have voted to adopt Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and most have adopted both ELA as well as Common Core Standards for Mathematics. The next step is far more critical in achieving the goals for closing achievement gaps and preparing young people to be successful in college and the workplace. A sustainable plan for implementation must also be agreed upon. Each state has a unique opportunity to plan deployment in the schools appropriate for their geographic region, design professional development for teachers, and work with other states to plan consistent methods for assessment.

A Blueprint for Reform

A call for reform came from the President Obama and the U.S. Department of Education through the publication *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

This blueprint builds on the significant reforms already made in response to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 around four areas: (1) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness; (2) Providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's schools; (3) Implementing college- and career-ready standards; and (4) Improving student learning and achievement in America's lowest-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 3).

In agreement the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2008), the president offered an invitation to states to work together to develop a common curriculum in math and English language arts. The call for each state to upgrade existing stan-

dards or "work with other states to develop and adopt common state-developed standards" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 8) is a major action taken in support of standards based reform. Included in the adoption of standards is the call for new assessment systems designed to measure higher order thinking skills, accurate measure of growth, and informed classroom instruction. The Blueprint highlights plans for more effective means of teacher recruitment and retention. In addition, teacher professional development should be research based and designed to place effective teachers in schools with the greatest academic needs. The plan sets forth the mandate to hold individual states and districts accountable for closing achievement gaps and for providing teachers with support they need for success.

The No Child Left Behind legislation set forth major education reforms to close achievement gaps, but the program was flawed in that a culture of testing and accountability superseded best practices in the classroom. Schools districts were faced with the dilemma of choosing between, first—setting high academic goals for all students while simultaneously, lowering standards to accommodate students who needed obtainable cut scores. According to the statement by President Obama, there should be continued effort in achieving equity and opportunity for all students including resources needed for diverse groups of learners (US Department of Education, 2010). There must be adequate correlation between cut scores for successful students in K12 and cut scores on qualifying exams for those entering college (Camara & Quenemoen, 2012). Even though these two goals seem to be somewhat in opposition to each other, the Blueprint sets in motion education reform through a unified effort by all states to work together, to develop and implement a common core curriculum. States would be rewarded through incentives such as Race to the Top funds. State and local leaders who propose ambitious systemic standards-based reform would be the most competitive for receiving federal funding

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