LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

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Introduction

The need for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has fostered interest in questions like these:

- What are the current sources of information about academic standards and student achievement in the United States?
- What attempts have been made to create common standards?
- What is the Common Core State Standards Initiative?
- What are the arguments for and against adopting common educational standards for grades K-12?
- How do content and rigor of state standards compare with the Common Core?
- Would rigorous standards improve achievement?
- How will the Common Core be assessed?
- How would scores from Common-Core assessments be used?
- What is the role of the federal government with respect to accountability?

In order to provide background information for the consensus process that has been undertaken by the League of Women Voters, this paper summarizes efforts to improve consistency in academic expectations, assessment procedures, achievement standards, evaluation practices and accountability systems across the nation.

What are the current sources of information about academic standards and student achievement in the United States?

Students who move from one part of the United States to another during their K-12 school careers are likely to encounter substantial variations in curriculum. Standards for student performance vary widely by state. States publish annual reports of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which are required by federal law, but the meaning of "proficient" in those reports can vary widely from one state to another (Cronin, Dahlin, Adkins, & Kingsbury, 2007). The roots of current state-to-state inconsistencies lie in the fact that public education in the United States has traditionally been a local responsibility. The tradition of local governance has led to inconsistent requirements and standards for student performance across the country.

Textbook publishers have created something of a *de facto* national curriculum, based on market needs. Consequently, many textbooks from major publishers have reflected the curricular choices that were made by educational groups in the largest states. Some publishers do create textbooks and other curricula for smaller markets. Large testing companies market a variety of norm-referenced standardized tests designed to compare performance of students across the country, but these tests are generally designed to rank students, rather than to determine how well students have mastered curricular objectives as criterion-referenced tests

would do. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) publishes results that are technically adequate for state-to-state comparisons, but that assessment is not designed to produce individual student scores. NAEP requires a large sample of students to produce results for the local level; however, most school systems are too small to qualify for testing that would produce local NAEP results. Therefore, in 2010, the United States does not have a consistent set of academic standards for grades K-12. In fact, even high school graduation requirements vary widely across the 50 states (Achieve, 2010).

Furthermore, recent international comparisons of students in 60 countries and five other educational systems (Kerachsky, 2010) have shown that American 15-year-old students perform approximately at the average level in reading and science and lower than average in mathematics. Noted critics such as the late Gerald Bracey (2008) have cautioned against overly simplistic interpretation of these results, charging that the real underlying problem is that there is more poverty in the United States than in most of the countries in the international comparison.

> *As usual in these comparisons, Americans in low-poverty schools look very good, even in mathematics. They would be ranked third in the 4th grade (among 36 nations) and 6th in the 8th grade (among 47 nations). This is important because while other developed nations have poor children, the U. S. has a much higher proportion and a much weaker safety net. When UNICEF studied poverty in 22 wealthy nations, the U.S. ranked 21st*. (Bracey, 2008)

The blueprint for reauthorization of the ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) references the decline in American education by tracking the decline among college graduates:

> *Today, more than ever, a world-class education is a prerequisite for success. America was once the best educated nation in the world. A generation ago, we led all nations in college completion, but today, 10 countries have passed us. It is not that their students are smarter than ours. It is that these countries are being smarter about how to educate their students. And the countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow*. (p.1)

If state standards vary widely, then opportunities for learning, expectations for achievement and standards for performance will depend upon where students happen to live. Educational expectations of employers have increased steadily over the past half-century, and students who live in areas that continue to hold low expectations may not be prepared to compete in a global economy. In addition, if state standards vary widely, then states must develop, publish, administer, score and report on their own tests. Consequently, those states cannot hope to save money by pooling resources for efficiency.

What attempts have been made to create common standards?

An *Issue Brief* from the Alliance for Excellent Education (Rothman, 2009) summarized the efforts of various groups to create common standards across the United States. Early efforts to foster development of national standards and a related system of assessments in the core subject areas began in 1992 through awarding of grants to a dozen national organizations. Now, the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has created a 50-states-and-50-tests environment in public education. Neither of these efforts brought about

the hoped-for consensus to bring equity, efficiency and higher expectations to K-12 education in the United States.

Instead, each state has been allowed to develop its own tests and standards, which were approved by the U.S. Department of Education. The consequence in 2010 is that there is wide variation in rigor and content of both curriculum and assessments for accountability across the 50 states. This has led to wide state-to-state discrepancies in the level of achievement that is called "proficient" for reporting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for NCLB (Cronin, et al., 2007). These discrepancies are very evident when NAEP results are compared with state results. Similarly, at the end of high school, data from college admissions tests (ACT, 2010) reveal variations among states in expectations and performance resulting in a state-to-state range in the percent of students who met college readiness standards that varied from 10 percent to 37 percent in the 2009 data.

What is the Common Core State Standards Initiative?

In an effort to bring more alignment, rigor, and consistency to student 'proficiency' and to foster improvement in college-and-career readiness across the nation, the National Governor's Association (NGA), Common Core Standards Initiative 2010 and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) initiated the Common Core Standards Initiative (CCSI). It is important to note that this was a collaborative effort among groups with state representation; this was not a federal government initiative.

The developers (CCSI, 2010) collaborated with teachers, school administrators and experts, and then took into account over 10,000 public comments in order to develop standards that would provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare students for college and the workforce.

Forty-eight states and three U.S. territories supported the initiative, as did many organizations; however, Alaska and Texas did not participate (NGA, 2009). The final report was issued on June 2, 2010 (NGA, 2010).

The current standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics are posted on the Common Core Standards Initiative's website. Anchor standards for College and Career Readiness (CCR) in reading, writing, speaking, listening, language and mathematics were developed first. The K-12 Standards provide grade-specific targets that lead toward attainment of the CCR standards in each subject area. The current Standards include literacy standards for science, social studies and technical subjects for grades 6-12. Consensus for content standards in science and social studies had not been developed as of winter 2010 (CCSI, 2010).

What are the arguments for and against adopting common educational standards for grades K-12?

To answer the frequently asked question of why we need nation-wide standards for grades K-12, the Common Core Standards Initiative (CCSI, 2010) asserts:

> *We need standards to ensure that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Common standards will help ensure that students are receiving a high quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state. Common standards will provide a greater opportunity to share experiences and best practices within and across states that will improve our ability to best serve the needs of students.*

> *Standards do not tell teachers how to teach, but they do help teachers figure out the knowledge and skills their students should have so that teachers can build the best lessons and environments for their classrooms. Standards also help students and parents by setting clear and realistic goals for success. Standards are a first step – a key building block – in providing our young people with a high-quality education that will prepare them for success in college and work. Of course, standards are not the only thing that is needed for our children's success, but they provide an accessible roadmap for our teachers, parents, and students.*

Early childhood experts (Gerwertz, 2010), focused on development of children from kindergarten through third grade, have varied in their degree of support for the standards. Some saw value in having a common set of expectations, while others worried that the standards may be too narrow or that important standards could be misused.

The U.S. Department of Education has not required adoption of the standards as a condition of eligibility for federal funds. Recurring federal funds have been distributed to states according to previously established criteria, without regard to whether states adopted the Common Core. However, states that chose to apply for the competitive grant funds associated with the Barack Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program were required to adopt the Common Core (U. S. Department of Education (USDE, 2009). The Obama administration's blueprint for reauthorization of the ESEA has indicated that in various grant competitions priority will be given to applications from states that have adopted the Common Core (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

The strongest arguments against adopting the Common Core Standards for K-12 seem to center on two issues: (1) the cost and difficulty of changing the existing curriculum and assessments and (2) the sovereignty of states in issues related to education. These arguments were articulated in a letter from Texas Governor Rick Perry to U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The letter objected to the U.S. Department of Education's requirement that states must have adopted the K-12 Common Core Standards as a condition for receiving RTTT competitive grant funding. Governor Perry (Perry, 2010) said:

> *I will not commit Texas taxpayers to unfunded federal obligations or to the adoption of unproven, cost-prohibitive national curriculum standards and tests. RTTT would amount to as little as $75 per student in one-time funding, yet the cost to Texas taxpayers to implement national standards and assessments could be up to an estimated $3 billion.*

> *In the interest of preserving our state sovereignty over matters concerning education and shielding local schools from unwarranted federal intrusion into local district decision-making, Texas will not be submitting an application for RTTT funds.*

Requiring adoption of the Common Core in the competition for RTTT funds appears to have influenced the majority of states to commit to making the change. Forty states, plus the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands, had adopted the Common Core by December, 2010 (CCSI, 2010).

How do content and rigor of state standards compare with the Common Core?

Governor Perry (Perry, 2010) raised a third argument, saying, "States agreeing to adopt these national curriculum standards would be hamstrung from adopting their own, more comprehensive standards."

This argument has been addressed in two ways. Although the U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2009) required states to adopt the Common Core in order to apply for grant funds associated with its RTTT competition, it gave states "the latitude to add 15 percent to the content of the standards to reflect state preferences and areas of emphasis."

Secondly, the suggestion that state standards are likely to be more rigorous than the Common Core Standards has been thoroughly evaluated in a 373-page report from the Fordham Institute (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010, pp. 3-4). The main points are summarized below:

> *What is the state of state standards in 2010? And how does the Common Core compare?*
>
> *The Common Core math standards earn a grade of A-minus while the Common Core ELA standards earn a B-plus, both solidly in the honors range. Neither is perfect. Both are very, very strong.*
>
> *Indeed the Common Core standards are clearer and more rigorous than the ELA and math standards presently used by the vast majority of states. Out of 102 comparisons—fifty-one jurisdictions times two subjects—we found the Common Core clearly superior seventy-six times.*
>
> *But the story gets more complicated, because we also discovered that the present ELA standards of three jurisdictions—California, the District of Columbia, and Indiana—are clearly better than the Common Core. … Furthermore, the ELA standards of eleven other states are roughly equivalent in quality to the Common Core, or "too close to call." … As for math, the current standards of eleven states plus the District of Columbia are roughly equivalent in quality to the Common Core, also "too close to call."*

With only a few exceptions, the Fordham Institute report (Carmichael, et al. 2010, pp 3-4) evaluated the Common Core standards very favorably, when compared with individual state standards. In only three of 102 comparisons were the state standards judged to be more rigorous than the Common Core.

Would rigorous standards improve achievement?

A 2009 study published by the Brookings Institute (Whitehurst, 2009) concluded that there was no statistical association between ratings of the quality of state standards and state scores on NAEP. In fact, it is interesting to note that some of the low-performing states have some of the most rigorous standards. The explanation offered for this discrepant finding is that "high-quality common standards may affect student achievement only in a system in which there are also aligned assessments, aligned curriculum, accountability for educators, accountability for students, aligned professional development, managerial autonomy for school leaders, and teachers who are drawn from the best and brightest, and so on." This finding echoes the concerns of educators and decision makers who understand that improvement occurs only when standards are effectively implemented in conjunction with other aspects of the educational system, such as curriculum and assessment.

A Fordham Institute report (Finn & Petrilli, 2010) discussed at least three possible models for implementing the Common Core Standards:

(1) Create a powerful national governing board to oversee implementation of the Common Core and related assessments,

(2) Stay with the *status quo*, leaving implementation to districts, states and the market and have the CCSSI update the standards every five or ten years, and

(3) Set up an interim coordinating council, funded by private foundations and state dues and possibly some federal funds, to promote information sharing and capacity building among states, conduct research to track implementation of the Standards, and recommend a long-term governance strategy.

It would be impossible to overstate the importance of implementing the Common Core standards well. Teachers will need professional development to help them adjust instructional expectations and develop classroom assessments that will accurately reflect the focus of the standards. Grading criteria may need to be adjusted to match the rigorous expectations of the Common Core. New accountability tests and accountability systems must be designed. Merely adopting the standards will not be sufficient. In order to have a positive impact, the Common Core standards must be translated into action in classrooms, assessed appropriately and reflected in published results from accountability systems.

How will the Common Core be assessed?

The norm-referenced tests that have been in widespread use across the United States do a good job of ranking students and identifying those who are particularly strong or particularly weak in academic skills; however, norm-referenced tests are not designed to measure how well students have mastered specific content and skills that are part of the curriculum. Instead, updated accountability systems will require new standardized criterion-referenced tests, which do measure mastery of a curriculum that is based on the Common Core.

The federal government is not planning a national test for this purpose. Instead two groups of states have combined resources to create options for assessing the common core. These assessments differ in many ways from the multiple-choice tests that have typically been used for state accountability in recent years.

Two coalitions, together representing 44 states and the District of Columbia, won a U.S. Department of Education competition for $330 million dollars federal aid to design "comprehensive assessment systems" aligned to the Common Core and designed to measure whether students are on track for college and career success. The awards, announced in September, 2010, (Robelen, 2010) were divided between the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which consists of 26 states and received $170 million, and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), which consists of 31 states and received $160 million. At least twelve states participated in both coalitions and are waiting to decide which assessment system will best meet their needs.

The PARCC consortium (PARCC, 2010), led by the state of Florida, proposed a system that would include:

(1) several assessments offered at key times during year to provide feedback and allow teachers to make adjustments,

(2) streamlined end-of-year assessments,

(3) administration of assessments via computer to allow faster turn-around of results and allow developers to include new types of test items (students in the early grades may respond on paper until they have developed adequate computer skills), and

(4) sophisticated items and performance tasks, including innovative computer-enhanced items designed to measure a wide range of knowledge and skills.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment consortium (SBAC, 2010), led by the state of Washington, proposed a system of state-of-the-art adaptive online exams, using "open source" technology that would include:

(1) the required summative exams (offered twice each school year),

(2) optional formative or benchmark exams,

(3) a variety of tools, processes and practices that teachers may use in planning and implementing informal, ongoing assessment to assist teachers in understanding what students are and are not learning on a daily basis so they can adjust instruction accordingly, and

(4) a paper-and-pencil option, which will be offered for the first three years.

Both consortia are designing assessment systems that will be aligned to the Common Core Standards and enable cross-state comparisons of results (Jones, Side-by-side overview of consortia of states, 2010b). Both assessment systems will attempt to track individual student progress toward the College and Career Readiness Standards as well as develop "cut scores" that show if students are college or career ready.

The development contracts call for both PARCC and SBAC systems to be ready for implementation by the 2014-2015 school year. In addition, two other consortia are developing alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities, which are also aligned to the Common Core (Jones, S.C. Department of Education Presentation at Instructional Leaders Roundtable, 2010a).

How would scores from Common-Core assessments be used?

The developers of the Common-Core assessments have described ways that teachers could use the resulting information. Providing student achievement reports in a timely manner would be only one step in making use of test results. Staff development activities for teachers and administrators would have to address appropriate and inappropriate uses of score reports and help teachers find ways to use the resulting information to adjust instruction. Training teachers and administrators to interpret and use the score report information is important to the quality of implementation of the Common Core.

The American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2008), the American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education have appointed a joint committee to revise the well established *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (Joint Committee of the American Educational Research Association [AERA], American Psychological Association [APA] and National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 1999), which have long been "considered to be the definitive source for information concerning sound test development and use." *The Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* (Joint Committee of AERA, APA, and NCME, 2004), summarized the main principles of *the Standards* in a shorter document for distribution in the public domain. Both of these documents address important principles, such as "Avoid using a single test score as the sole determinant of decisions about test takers. Interpret test scores in conjunction with other information about individuals."

The proposed assessments of the Common Core and the current interest in using test scores for evaluating teacher performance have created issues that were not addressed in earlier versions of *the Standards*. However, the planned revision gives measurement experts an opportunity to address the appropriateness of proposed uses of scores from the new assessments.

One critical set of issues involves the potential to use test scores in a variety of ways for accountability. Both of the development consortia are planning systems that allow for cross-state comparisons (Jones, Side-by-side overview of consortia of states, 2010b). Would there be sanctions or rewards associated with performance on standardized tests? Should any possible rewards or sanctions include awarding bonuses or withholding salary increases?

A poll conducted by *TIME* magazine (*TIME*, 2010) in August 2010, found that, within ±3 percentage points, 64 percent of Americans support the idea that teacher evaluations should be based in part on their students' performance on standardized tests. With merit pay, as with many other appealing ideas, the "devil is in the details."

The notion that merit pay for individual teachers would result in improved student achievement seems obvious until people begin to think about how to implement an effective merit pay system at the individual teacher level. The list of obstacles seems endless. The most obvious problem is that teaching assignments vary greatly from grade-to-grade, subject-to-subject and school-to-school. Another problem is that it simply is not feasible to require enough different standardized tests to measure all grades and content areas. A third problem is that any scheme that uses nothing but test scores to determine rewards or sanctions would leave out many important variables, such as the educational attainment of parents or the difficulty of educating children from families in poverty. Since many factors outside of school can affect test scores, other measures, such as observations of teaching performance, must be incorporated into any teacher's evaluation. Furthermore, if classroom observations are included, it is critical that they be unannounced, so that they sample typical performance, rather than showcase lessons.

Anyone who attempts to devise a plan to use test scores in an equitable way to award merit pay must carefully consider the psychometric properties of a variety of tests and the statistical properties of various possible reward systems. Wisdom dictates that anyone who tries to design such a system must also consider the likely, but unintended, outcomes that would result. For example, a system that pits teachers against one another to compete for a limited pool of funds would likely foster competition instead of much-needed collaboration.

In August 2010, ten of the nation's premier educational researchers (Baker, Barton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, Ladd, Linn, Ravtich, Rothstein, Shavelson & Shepard, 2010) co-authored a report that cautioned against relying on student test scores, even in the popular value-added statistical models, as a major indicator for evaluating teachers. In its news release, the Economic Policy Institute (2010), noted the extraordinary credentials of this group of authors and summarized their caution to policy makers.

> *The distinguished authors of EPI's report,* ***Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers,*** *include four former presidents of the American Educational Research Association; two former presidents of the National Council on Measurement in Education; the current and two former chairs of the Board of Testing and Assessment of*

> *the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences; the president-elect of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management; the former director of the Educational Testing Service's Policy Information Center and a former associate director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; a former assistant U.S. Secretary of Education; a former and current member of the National Assessment Governing Board; and the current vice-president, a former president, and three other members of the National Academy of Education.*
>
> *The co-authors make clear that the accuracy and reliability of analyses of student test scores, even in their most sophisticated form, is highly problematic for high-stakes decisions regarding teachers. Consequently, policymakers and all stakeholders in education should rethink this new emphasis on the centrality of test scores for holding teachers accountable.*

Some of the implementation problems associated with merit pay programs can be avoided by creating a system that rewards entire schools or teams of teachers, instead of individuals. However, Diane Ravitch (2010), a highly respected scholar, has pointed out that there is very little evidence to suggest that any proposal to use test data either to award bonuses or to fire teachers could be implemented fairly and effectively, simply because there are too many other confounding factors that affect the scores.

Some districts have offered bonuses to teachers who accept positions that are judged to be unusually difficult assignments. In summarizing the issues surrounding merit pay, Marshall (2010) concluded, "There is a role for monetary incentives in three areas: career-ladder opportunities for the most highly rated teachers to take on extra responsibilities for extra pay; incentives for the most effective teachers to work in high-need schools and subject areas; and denial of step-increases to teachers with mediocre ratings, (while, of course, moving to dismiss teachers with unsatisfactory ratings)."

What is the role of the federal government with respect to accountability?

Since 1969, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) has reported results from NAEP, which is also known as the Nation's Report Card. NAEP has conducted periodic national assessments in reading, mathematics, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography and other subjects. In 1990, NAEP began conducting and reporting results from voluntary state-level assessments (NCES, 2010). Since the NCLB reauthorization of the ESEA in 2001, states that receive Title I funding have been required to participate in state NAEP in reading and mathematics at grades 4 and 8 every two years.

Pursuant to the NCLB Legislation of 2001, the U.S. Department of Education (2010b) issued regulations detailing requirements for states to report results of peer-reviewed state assessments and outlining consequences for schools that receive Title I funds if they fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools that consistently fail to meet their targets face a series of increasingly onerous sanctions (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 97-98). The possible consequences include being required to allow students to transfer to successful schools and paying for their transportation, offering tutoring at public expense, and eventually restructuring the school. Options for resturcturing schools include converting to a charter school, replacing the principal

and staff, and relinquishing control to private management or the state. There is not much evidence to support the effectiveness of any of these restructuring options (Ravitch, 104-105).

The blueprint for reauthorization of the ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a) has proposed modifying the state-by-state accountability measures by reporting graduation rates and measures of academic growth in addition to student academic achievement.

What happens next?

Most, but not all, states have adopted the Common Core. Assessment consortia have begun working to develop new ways to measure achievement of the Common Core standards. State agencies have begun to develop implementation plans, but many teachers and administrators have had little or no exposure to the standards. The media has indicated that there is considerable interest in using test scores as part of evaluation and accountability systems, and professional measurement experts have agreed to collaborate on revised recommendations for appropriate test construction and appropriate uses of resulting scores. Still many questions remain unanswered.

The future of public education in the United States has become uncertain. Vouchers and tax credit proposals continue to compete for educational funds. Public schools in many places have reported that funding sources are inadequate. In recent years, an ever-increasing number of students have opted for online educational opportunities, either through public school options or through private providers. Gaps between historically underachieving groups and the rest of the population continue to exist. The Common Core has created an opportunity to achieve consistency and raise standards. The Common Core has also raised concerns about the latitude that local educators have to determine curriculum and set standards. Finally, state consortia have begun developing new assessments, but many questions remain as to how the resulting scores might be used or misused. Revision of the ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) looms on the horizon, and the role of the federal government in supporting and regulating public education could be redefined in numerous ways.

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