



## **Policy Brief: Common Core State Standards Initiative**

The Common Core State Standards were released today at Peachtree Ridge High School in Suwanee, Georgia. This event is the result of more than one year's work on a set of common academic standards for K-12 students across the country. With any initiative comes support and opposition; the purpose of this paper is to highlight the key components of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and share some of the issues surrounding this initiative.

### *The Common Core State Standards Initiative*

Governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia have collaborated to draft a set of common academic standards for students in grades K-12. This collaboration is a nation-wide, state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

The Common Core State Standards comprise the content knowledge and skills that all U.S. students should have for post-secondary success in college, training programs, or the workforce. The standards provide a clear and consistent framework of mathematics and English language arts standards at each grade level. Clear expectations for student educational outcomes ensure that all students receive consistent instruction in English language arts and mathematics no matter where they live in the U.S. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) website, the Common Core State Standards are

- Aligned with college and work expectations;
- Clear, understandable and consistent;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Evidence-based.<sup>1</sup>

The English language arts standards build on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks in Reading and Writing. The math standards arise from conclusions from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and other studies of high-performing countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Common Core State Standards Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org>.

The NAEP is currently one of the best measures that we have to compare academic achievement among students in different states. The NAEP also helps to show the huge discrepancies in state-level achievement and achievement on this national indicator. For instance, in 2009 only 7 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students failed to meet standards on Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in reading.<sup>2</sup> Yet during that same year, 28 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students failed to meet standards on the reading portion of the NAEP test.<sup>3</sup> Similar discrepancies exist in other states between state-level tests and the NAEP. The Common Core State Standards will ensure that all students in every participating state are held to the same academic standards and held accountable to the same level of academic proficiency on standardized exams.

Teachers, school administrators, and other experts participated in the development of the standards and, along with other members of the general public, provided feedback on the first draft of the standards. Multiple organizations and corporations have endorsed the standards.<sup>4</sup> To date, three states have formally adopted the standards, pending approval of the final draft of the standards which will be released in June. Adoption signifies that the state's standards authorizing body has taken formal action to adopt and implement the Common Core State Standards.

Georgia has shown considerable support for the Common Core State Standards. The state plans to conduct training and align resources during 2010-11 and implement the standards in 2011-12. The state feels confident that the new standards are right for Georgia because they align with the current Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). Additionally, Georgia's previous work in developing and implementing the GPS has prepared the state for the process of implementing the Common Core State Standards.<sup>5</sup>

States that choose to adopt the Common Core State Standards must adopt 100 percent of the standards within three years. This core must represent at least 85 percent of each state's standards in English language arts and mathematics. Common Core State Standards for science, and potentially other subjects, will be added in the future. Because so much of each state's standards will be the same, adoption of the Common Core State Standards will enable states to share resources and save money on textbooks and assessments aligned with the new standards.

#### *States' Critiques of the Initiative*

Adoption of the Common Core State Standards is voluntary and is neither led nor mandated by the federal government. Still, many have expressed concerns about the Common Core State Standards opening a door for increased federal regulation of education. For one, the current federal administration's blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act would tie \$14.5 billion in Title I money

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Department of Education State Report Card. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. NAEP State Profile, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org) for a list of endorsing partners.

<sup>5</sup> Georgia Department of Education, Office of Standards, Instruction, Assessment and Communications. "Common Core State Standards Initiative."

for low-income districts adopting the Common Core State Standards. Additionally, Race to the Top grants are tied to adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Both Alaska and Texas—the only two states that have formally opted out of the common standards formulation process—cite these ties to federal funding as one of many concerns about adopting the new standards.<sup>6</sup>

### *Leading Early Childhood Experts' Critiques*

Other concerns about the Common Core State Standards stem from research on best practices for young children. According to the Alliance for Childhood, comprised of roughly 100 professors, psychiatrists, researchers, and other experts, the Common Core State Standards conflict with research about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them. They state that, for one, the new standards will lead to long hours of instruction in literacy and math. Research indicates that increased focus on standards has pushed developmentally appropriate, play-based learning out of many kindergartens. Second, the Alliance believes that the new standards will lead to inappropriate standardized testing, stating that standardized tests are unreliable assessments for children under age 8. Furthermore, there is little evidence that such standards for young children lead to later success; many countries with top-performing high school students do not begin formal schooling until age 6 or 7.

The Alliance for Childhood does not express opposition to the Common Core State Standards as a whole, but they do call on the NGA and the CCSSI to suspend drafting of the standards for grades K-3.<sup>7</sup>

### *Additional Concerns*

In addition to state-specific and age-specific concerns, some scholars critique adoption of the new standards altogether. Alfie Kohn, an author and critic of many aspects of traditional education, writes that educational excellence is being confused with uniformity, rigor, specificity, and victory. Kohn claims that ensuring that all children get a great education does not mean that all children should get the same education. (This is also an element of Alaska's argument which suggests that the Common Core State Standards are not necessarily appropriate for the unique needs of students in Alaska.<sup>8</sup>) Furthermore, TIMSS results do not justify nationalized standards (which Kohn argues is no different from what we will have even if we try to argue that the Common Core State Standards are a state-led effort). For instance, on 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and science tests, eight of the ten top scoring countries had centralized education systems. Nine of the ten lowest

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, L. "Alaska, Texas Reject Common Core Standards: Other States Also Warn Against Diluting High Standards." The Heartland Institute, May 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.heartland.org>; See also Texas Education Agency News. "Congressional Hearing Raises Concerns About National Standards." December 8, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us>.

<sup>7</sup> Alliance for Childhood. "Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative." March 2, 2010. Retrieved from <http://stopnationalstandards.org>.

<sup>8</sup> See Noon, D. "Notes from Alaska's Common Core Comparison." Borderland, March 27, 2010. Retrieved from <http://borderland.northernattitude.org>.

scoring countries in math and eight of the ten lowest scoring in science also had centralized education systems.<sup>9</sup> Thus, increasing uniformity will not necessarily produce higher academic achievement.

### *Final Thoughts*

Although 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia have participated in the process of developing the Common Core State Standards, there is no guarantee that they will all adopt the standards. Some states have expressed concerns about the adoption of the new standards, particularly if the final draft of the standards is less rigorous than a state's current standards. Overall, the Common Core State Standards garner support from multiple stakeholders in education, particularly those who believe in improving U.S. students' ability to compete domestically and internationally. The Common Core State Standards also draw notable concerns from early childhood experts and other scholars who do not believe that uniformity is necessary for educational excellence.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education believes that with proper implementation, support, and teacher preparation, the Common Core State Standards will benefit Georgia students. In light of the current economic crisis and the resulting state budget cuts to education, ensuring that adequate staff development funding is made available for this initiative will be critical. Educators will require support and professional development to successfully implement the Common Core State Standards and raise student achievement. The Partnership supports the work of the NGA and the CCSSO in this initiative, believing that it will ensure that Georgia's students are academically competent and prepared to compete in the U.S. and abroad.

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<sup>9</sup> Kohn, A. "Debunking the Case for National Standards: One-Size-Fits-All Mandates and Their Dangers." Education Week, January 14, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/national.htm>.