



The Research Bureau

Toward a Common Understanding of the Common Core

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Toward a Common Understanding of the Common Core

By the Worcester Regional Research Bureau

Executive Summary

In 2010, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers released the Common Core State Standards – educational standards for mathematics and English language arts adopted by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and 43 other states. The Common Core State Standards lay out the knowledge and skills that a student should possess at each stage in his or her kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education. These standards are designed to ensure that high school graduates are “...prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs.” In 2014, the two independent assessment systems for testing mastery of the Common Core – the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) – are completing field testing and analysis of the initial pilot runs. Despite early wide-spread state support and adoption, the Common Core has inspired significant outcry. Concerns range from the quality of the content to the role of testing in measuring student, teacher, and school performance. The Research Bureau’s report, *Toward a Common Understanding of the Common Core*, analyzes the arguments raised against the Common Core and offers a factual basis for review. The report endorses the Common Core, but makes a number of recommendations for improving the implementation of the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks based on the Common Core and its assessment system, including:

- maintaining Massachusetts-based standards for subjects beyond English language arts and mathematics;
- ensuring PARCC or any final assessment system includes Massachusetts-specific standards;
- establishing a state-wide capital plan for upgrading technology and facilities to accommodate online assessment tests;
- incorporating computer and typing modules into school curriculum to ensure student familiarity with the testing format;
- continuing distribution of student test results to school districts and parents to ensure constructive learning from the testing itself;
- reconsidering the timeline for measuring student, teacher, and school achievement based on student testing results to accommodate the challenge of implementation of the new standards and systems; and
- formalizing a clear timeline for review and revision of the new standards based on Massachusetts’ experiences.

Toward a Common Understanding of the Common Core

By the Worcester Regional Research Bureau

Citizens know intuitively what some of the best economists have shown in their research, that education is one of the chief engines of a society's material well-being. They know, too, that education is the common bond of a pluralistic society and helps tie us to other cultures around the globe. Citizens also know in their bones that the safety of the United States depends principally on the wit, skill, and spirit of a self-confident people, today and tomorrow. It is, therefore, essential--especially in a period of long-term decline in educational achievement--for government at all levels to affirm its responsibility for nurturing the Nation's intellectual capital.

--National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, April 1983

Public education in North America dates back to the settlement of the original thirteen colonies. Boston Latin School was established in 1635, less than five years after the founding of Boston itself. Yet over 375 years later, the elements of education – intergovernmental coordination and control, public and private involvement, and the content of the curriculum, instructional methodologies, and testing philosophies – remain topics of impassioned discussion. The Common Core State Standards, educational standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), has generated a new round of debate over education policy and practice in America.

The Common Core lays out the knowledge and skills that a student should possess at each stage in his or her kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education. These standards are designed to ensure that high school graduates are “...prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs.”¹ Since the launch of the Common Core in June 2010, 44 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have embraced the standards. In 2014, the two primary assessment systems for testing mastery of the Common Core – the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) – are completing field testing and research and data collection of the initial pilot runs.

Despite early wide-spread state support and adoption, the Common Core has inspired significant outcry. Concerns range from the quality of the content to the cost of implementation to the role of testing in measuring student, teacher, and school performance. One state, Indiana, which originally adopted the Common Core, publicly

¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative Website, “About the Standards,” <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

reversed its decision but drew heavily from the national standards in drafting its own.² As the Common Core standards remain in the initial stages of implementation, and assessments are only in the pilot phase, there are understandably very real questions requiring deeper inquiry and resolution. However, much of the discussion has been waylaid by misconception, or intentional obfuscation, of the origins, purpose, pedagogy, and implementation. In April 2014, The Research Bureau released *Bureau Brief – The Common Core State Standards*.³ The *Brief* laid out the factual framework of the issue, the arguments used by proponents and opponents of the standards, and critical questions for policymakers. Through this report, The Research Bureau builds on that factual foundation to offer a detailed analysis of the Common Core and its impact on education in Greater Worcester.

Definitions

While most citizens understand the basics of our education system, the precise terminology of the Common Core debate has led to a sometimes confused discussion. In drafting this report, The Research Bureau relies on the following definitions in relation to Common Core for certain widely used terms.

- Standards – Educational standards define the knowledge and skills that a student should possess at a certain stage in his or her education. Standards, generally established by state governments, do not define coursework, classroom activity, or school programming. For example, the current Massachusetts Reading Standards require (among other requisites) that 4th graders possess an ability to identify and compare points of view in a literary work, and that 5th graders possess an ability to identify how point of view impacts the understanding of the narrator and therefore the reader – a higher level of comprehension. The Massachusetts Readings Standards do not prescribe coursework or reading lists, they do not suggest a methodology for teaching point of view, and they do not define the amount of time spent on point of view versus other topics, whether in English class or otherwise. The Common Core State Standards, on their own, are simply expected grade-by-grade outputs of understanding.
- Curriculum – Curriculum is the framework of coursework and related content designed to secure mastery of a subject. Curriculum is set by local school districts. In addition to coursework, curriculum often includes the selection of textbooks, reading assignments, and other learning materials. Standards are achieved within a curriculum, but curriculum does not establish standards. Curriculum lays out the path by which educational information is conveyed through instruction (see below).
- Instruction – Instruction is the classroom delivery of content. It is the process for imparting information and understanding from teachers and learning materials to students. Lesson plans, crafted primarily by teachers, lay out daily progressive

² “Know More about the Common Core,” State Impact, <http://indianapublicmedia.org/stateimpact/tag/common-core-state-standards/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

³ “Bureau Brief – The Common Core State Standards,” Worcester Regional Research Bureau, April 2014, Brief 14-01, http://wrrb.org/files/downloads/reports/pub_edu/2014/bureau-brief-common-core-april-2014.pdf, accessed May 22, 2014.

Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?

Selected Common Core Standards for 5th Grade Reading and Mathematics.

Reading Standards for Literature:

- Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text. (Key Ideas and Details)
- Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem. (Craft and Structure)
- Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics. (Integration of Knowledge and Ideas)

Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students for College & Career, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, 2010.

Mathematics Standards:

- Write and interpret numerical expressions.
 1. Use parentheses, brackets, or braces in numerical expressions, and evaluate expressions with these symbols.
 2. Write simple expressions that record calculations with numbers, and interpret numerical expressions without evaluating them. *For example, express the calculation "add 8 and 7, then multiply by 2" as $2 \times (8 + 7)$. Recognize that $3 \times (18932 + 921)$ is three times as large as $18932 + 921$, without having to calculate the indicated sum or product.*
- Use equivalent fractions as a strategy to add and subtract fractions.
 1. Add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators (including mixed numbers) by replacing given fractions with equivalent fractions in such a way as to produce an equivalent sum or difference of fractions with like denominators. *For example, $2/3 + 5/4 = 8/12 + 15/12 = 23/12$. (In general, $a/b + c/d = (ad + bc)/bd$.)*
 2. Solve word problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions referring the same to the whole, including cases of unlike denominators, e.g., by using visual fraction models or equations to represent the problem. Use benchmark fractions and number sense of fractions to estimate mentally and assess the reasonableness of answers. *For example, recognize an incorrect result $2/5 + 1/2 = 3/7$, by observing that $3/7 < 1/2$.*

Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students for College & Career, *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*, 2010.

instruction designed to achieve the fulfillment of curriculum obligations and the successful mastery of standards.

- Assessment – Assessment is the process of analyzing student mastery of standards. The basis of assessment is testing. (Massachusetts currently uses the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as its method for assessing student achievement.) Assessment is not a part of the Common Core. Instead, the Federal government, through the Race to the Top initiative, provided \$330 million in grants to two major state testing consortia developed by state alliances – PARCC⁴ and

⁴ PARCC is composed of Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana,* Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. Pennsylvania is a

SBAC⁵ – to test student mastery of common educational standards. Under the Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school districts and states must use student testing results to assess school performance.⁶ Students must illustrate adequate yearly progress toward proficiency or school districts are held responsible.

- National – While often used as a synonym for the term “Federal,” this report is particular in its use of the term “national.” “National” describes something so broad in scope as to include all or the majority of the individual states, or citizens, of the country. “Federal” refers to the Government of the United States of America – the authorities and collective actions of those institutions established by the United States Constitution. The Common Core is a set of national standards; they are standards that have been conceived by, made available to, and have been adopted and implemented by the majority of states across the nation. The Common Core State Standards are not Federal standards, as they were not drafted or mandated by the Federal government.

In the pages to come, we will explore the origins and the implementation of national education reform from the mid-20th century to the Common Core State Standards. We will also explore education reform in Massachusetts over the last three decades, culminating in the Commonwealth’s academic leadership on NAEP. Finally, we will review the debate surrounding the Common Core and outline our recommendations for moving forward with the Common Core-based standards and student assessments in Massachusetts.

Education in America

The Federal Office of Education was established in 1867 for:

...the purpose of collecting such statistics and facts as shall show the condition and progress of education in the several States and Territories, and of diffusing such information respecting the organization and management of schools and school systems, and the methods of teaching, as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems, and otherwise promote the cause of education throughout the country.⁷

The Commissioner of Education reported first to the chief of the Department of the Interior and later to the chief of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Notwithstanding the Office, there were few reliable national “statistics and facts” showing

Participating State. <https://www.parcconline.org/parcc-states>, accessed May 22, 2014. *While still listed on the website, Indiana may no longer participate in PARCC as a result of its recent rejection of the Common Core.

⁵ SBAC is composed of California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Pennsylvania is an Advisory State. The U.S. Virgin Islands is an Affiliate Member. <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/member-states/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁶ No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, §1116, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁷ “An Act to establish a Department of Education, and for other purposes.” Public Law 96-88, October 17, 1979, <http://history.nih.gov/research/downloads/PL96-88.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

the “condition and progress of education” across the country until the middle of the 20th century. By the 1950s and 1960s, with the end of World War II and the arrival of the Baby Boom, the United States was grappling with significant social and economic change resulting in the decline of urban centers and the growth of suburbs. To understand the impact on educational outcomes, the Exploratory Committee for the Assessment of Progress in Education (ECAPE) was established in 1964 with funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York, which led to the first National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1969.⁸ Between 1965 and 1967, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and related amendments were passed as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty Initiative.⁹ The Federal government assumed an active financial role in education in order to address disparities in outcomes for low-income, disabled, and minority students. The funds were distributed based on U.S. Census Bureau data as block grants to individual states, which then distributed the grants to eligible local school districts and schools. Direct funding of public education was a new arena for the Federal government. The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution retains for the states and the citizenry any power not specifically granted to the Federal government or prohibited to the states. The Constitution is silent on education. In acknowledgement of general concern about the limits of the Federal role in this arena, the 1965 ESEA included the following language, which has been incorporated in some form in every reauthorization of the Act:

Nothing contained in this Act shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials by any educational institution or school system.¹⁰

The Act has been reauthorized regularly. President Jimmy Carter reauthorized the Act in 1978, significantly increasing Federal education spending, and a year later established a cabinet-level U.S. Department of Education. President Ronald Reagan signed two versions of the Act, one in 1981 and another in 1988. Under Reagan, the legislation began to focus on outcomes by defining levels of student academic achievement and insisting on testing for accountability. Reagan also created the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which published a report in 1983 entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report warned:

⁸ NAEP results were only reported for the nation as a whole through 1988. Beginning in 1990, states could voluntarily participate in Trial State Assessments, which the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made mandatory, allowing biennial state-by-state data collection and comparison for reading and mathematics in grades four and eight.

⁹ See Lyndon Baines Johnson, “State of the Union Address,” January 8, 1964, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3382>, accessed May 22, 2014, and Lyndon Baines Johnson, “The Great Society,” Address at the University of Michigan, May 22, 1964, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lbj-michigan/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

¹⁰ “An Act to strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation’s elementary and secondary schools.” Public Law 89-10, April 11, 1965, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg27.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world....The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people....If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.¹¹

The report made education front page news and mobilized support for education reform.¹² In 1989, President George H.W. Bush convened an education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia attended by 49 of the 50 state governors to discuss America's competitiveness and the state of public education. At the conclusion of the summit the President and the governors agreed to:

- establish a process for setting education goals,
- work toward greater flexibility and enhanced accountability in the use of Federal resources to meet the goals, through both regulatory and legislative changes,
- undertake a major state-by-state effort to restructure the education system, and
- report annually on progress in achieving the goals.¹³

The National Governors Association, a bi-partisan organization that represents the collective views of the nation's governors, continued the governors' focus on education through its Center for Best Practices. In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed a version of the ESEA (Improving America's Schools Act) that included money for improved teacher training, for curriculum development, for technology in the schools, and for expanded charter school flexibility.¹⁴ The most significant part of the Act mandated that each state develop uniform academic standards with aligned assessments to measure student progress. That same year, Clinton signed The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which set high standards and provided funding for defined educational outcomes in school readiness, student achievement, and more.¹⁵

The 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), passed with bipartisan support led by President George W. Bush and four Congressional co-authors, including two Republicans and two Democrats (one of whom was Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy). NCLB required that by the 2013/2014 school

¹¹ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*, April 1983, <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

¹² Edward Graham, "'A Nation at Risk' Turns 30: Where Did It Take Us?" *NEA Today* website, accessed May 22, 2014, <http://neatoday.org/2013/04/25/a-nation-at-risk-turns-30-where-did-it-take-us/>.

¹³ "Federal Education Policy and the States, 1945-2009, The George H.W. Bush Years: Education Summit," *State of New York Archives*, http://www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res_essay_bush_ghw_edsummit.shtml, accessed May 22, 2014

¹⁴ "The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994," Public Law 103-382, October 20, 1994, <http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/archives/legislation/ESEA/brochure/iasa-bro.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

¹⁵ See US Department of Education website, Archived Information, <http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/GOALS2000/TheAct/index.html>, Public Law 103-227, March 31, 1994, and <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/goals/progrpt/reality.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

year all 3rd grade students would be proficient in reading and all students 4th grade and above would be proficient in mathematics and English language arts. The act also required that by 2005/2006 all students would be taught by highly qualified teachers. States were obligated to develop and adopt standards, align their districts' curriculum to the standards, and administer assessments to track student achievement. Each school was required to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) for reading and mathematics between 3rd grade and 8th grade. For a school to meet AYP, at least 95% of students in a school as a whole and each of the subgroups as defined by the law (economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English-language learners, African-American students, Asian-American students, Caucasian students, Hispanic students, and Native American students) had to meet or exceed the measurable annual objectives set by the state for each year. If a school did not make AYP for any of the sub-groups for two years in a row, the school could come under a number of sanctions including state-controlled restructuring.

Although NCLB was initially well received, it soon came under heavy criticism, even from former supporters. Some were concerned about increased Federal involvement in education and that the AYP requirement resulted in too much focus on test preparation to the detriment of basic skills and knowledge.¹⁶ Others argued that the law was not fully funded.¹⁷ State legislatures and state education officials proved especially vocal over the cost of implementation, the difficulty in reaching AYP goals every year for every sub-group, and the growing realization that no state was on track to meet the 2014 deadline for student achievement. By 2011, 38% of schools in the country had failed to make AYP.¹⁸ NCLB, originally due for reauthorization in 2007, remains in effect until Congress crafts new legislation.¹⁹

In 2009, Education Secretary Arne Duncan established the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition, which made \$4.35 billion of Federal stimulus funds available to encourage States that were creating the conditions for education innovation and reform, achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, and implementing educational reforms in four core areas:

- adopting standards and assessments to prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and compete in a global economy,
- building data systems to measure student achievement and inform teachers and principals about instructional improvement opportunities,

¹⁶ Murnane & Papay, "Teacher's Views on No Child Left Behind: Support for Principles, Concerns about the Practices," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 24, Number 3, Summer 2010.

¹⁷ W. James Antle III, "Leaving No Child Left Behind," *The American Conservative*, August 1, 2005, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/leaving-no-child-left-behind/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

¹⁸ "Adequate Yearly Progress," *Education Week*, August 3, 2004, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/adequate-yearly-progress/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

¹⁹ The U.S. Department of Education has the authority to grant flexibility to states from NCLB requirements. In September 2011, the Obama Administration, under Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, agreed to allow flexibility to states that developed college- and career-ready standards for all students and used student achievement results based on the standards to evaluate teachers and principals. As of May 1, 2014, 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have received waivers. Note that adoption of the Common Core is not required for a waiver. Alaska, Texas, and Virginia received waivers but operate under state-developed standards. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/index.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

- recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, and
- turning around the lowest achieving schools.²⁰

A small percentage of the scoring rubric for RTTT (14%) required the development and adoption of common standards and assessments by 2010. Ultimately, 18 states and the District of Columbia received funding under RTTT.²¹ Although not mandatory, all of the winners adopted the Common Core State Standards.

What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards are educational standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers and released in June 2010. The Common Core lays out the concepts and skills students should master in mathematics and literacy in kindergarten through 12th Grade. The standards are not curriculum, which means that the standards do not dictate daily lesson plans or the books and learning materials a district or school uses. The complete standards are available at www.corestandards.org, the Common Core State Standards Initiative website hosted and maintained by NGA and CCSSO. The standards were developed under the auspices of the NGA and the CCSSO working with the non-profit organization Achieve, Inc., a business and government educational advocacy organization. Significant funding support (approximately \$170 million) for the development and implementation of the standards has been provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.²²

The CCSSO first raised the question of common standards at its 2007 Annual Policy Forum in Columbus, Ohio.²³ In December 2008, the CCSSO, NGA, and Achieve, Inc. released *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, which called for, among other goals, a “...common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12....”²⁴ While individual states had developed standards and assessments as required under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress illustrated significant differences in outcomes. For example, Alabama, which reported that 83% of its 4th graders were proficient in reading on its own state exam, saw only 22% of its 4th graders score at or above the proficient reading level on NAEP. In a 2007 report by the Institute for a Competitive Workforce, an affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce, only four states

²⁰ US Department of Education, *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*, November 2009, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

²¹ US Department of Education, Race to the Top Fund, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

²² Valerie Strauss, “Gates Foundation pours millions into Common Core in 2013,” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/11/27/gates-foundation-pours-millions-into-common-core-in-2013/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

²³ Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org, accessed May 22, 2014.

²⁴ National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, Washington, DC: NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, 2008.

received an “A” for rigor of their standards and only five states received an “A” for truth in advertising about their student achievement.²⁵ (Massachusetts was the only state to receive an “A” in both categories.)²⁶ In 2009, the NGA and CCSSO secured support from 51 states and territories to participate in the effort to draft national standards for mathematics and English language arts/literacy. Various workgroups were formed to draft and review college and career readiness standards as well as K-12 grade-by-grade standards. Massachusetts was particularly well represented as two officials from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) were on the Mathematics Work Team and four officials from the Massachusetts DESE were on the English Language Arts Work Team. Drafts were also shared with state education officials on a regular basis.²⁷

In September 2009, the NGA and CCSSO released a draft of the college and career readiness standards to the public for review and comment. By the end of the year, the college and career standards were merged with the K-12 grade-by-grade standards. A 28-member Validation Committee was established to review drafts in late 2009 and early 2010. In March 2010, a draft of the combined standards was also released to the public for additional comment. State education leaders, teachers, administrators and education experts were part of the feedback process.²⁸ In June 2010, the final Common Core State Standards were released and the Validation Committee, despite a small minority in dissent, published its final report stating: “Unlike past standards setting efforts, the Common Core State Standards are based on best practices in national and international education, as well as research and input from numerous sources....These common standards are an important step in bringing about a real and meaningful transformation of the education system for the benefit of all students.”²⁹

Although the timeline for drafting and disseminating the Common Core was relatively brief, governors and state education officials had been collaborating on national education goals and standards since at least the 1989 Charlottesville Education Summit. After Charlottesville, many governors continued to work through the NGA on education reform as illustrated by the list of NGA papers and publications concerning education standards and accountability that date back to 1995.³⁰ During the 1990s, the business community, too, began to take note of the state of education. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been a strong proponent of academic standards for many years.³¹ Achieve, established by

²⁵ Institute for a Competitive Workforce, “Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness,” Washington, DC: U.S. Chamber of Commerce, February 2007.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org, accessed May 22, 2014.

²⁸ For example, please see <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2013/oct/21/public-comments-common-core-hearing/teachers-were-not-involved-developing-common-core-/>; and <https://www.aft.org/newspubs/press/2010/060310.cfm>, both accessed on May 22, 2014.

²⁹ For the Validation Committee report and a list of members of the committee see http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CommonCoreReport_6.10.pdf, accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁰ See, for example, <http://www.nga.org/cms/home/news-room/publications.default.html?begin5d422004-4245-40d6-ac62-d656c41137a7=500&end5d422004-4245-40d6-ac62-d656c41137a7=525&pagesize5d422004-4245-40d6-ac62-d656c41137a7=25&>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

³¹ The US Chamber of Commerce Foundation Education and Workforce program “...promotes the rigorous educational standards and effective job training systems needed to preserve the strength of America’s greatest economic resource, its workforce.” See <http://education.uschamber.com/about-icw>, accessed May 22, 2014.

governors and business leaders in 1996, was founded to raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. Since that time, Achieve has also played an active role in the development of the Common Core and has published a series of papers on the knowledge and skills necessary for college and career success.³²

What are PARCC and SBAC?

It is important to distinguish between the standards and the assessment tests. Much of the current debate, while seemingly over the Common Core, is actually about the process and purposes of the assessments.

The Common Core lays out a framework of knowledge and understanding that each student should master at each stage of his or her schooling. Common Core does not suggest a means for testing the accomplishment of those standards. NCLB, however, requires states to assess achievement of educational standards through testing. For the Common Core standards, the major assessments are being developed by two state consortia. Massachusetts belongs to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers consortium, which currently consists of 15 states and the District of Columbia. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium currently consists of 23 members. The assessment consortia were funded as a result of the Federal Race to the Top Assessment Program grant competition, which provided approximately \$330 million in funding to "...develop assessments that are valid, support and inform instruction, provide accurate information about what students know and can do, and measure student achievement against standards designed to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace."³³ Massachusetts is currently field testing PARCC (a subset of Worcester Public Schools students has taken both the PARCC and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)), but has not yet officially adopted the testing. In 2015, upon completion of the pilot program, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary & Secondary Education will decide whether to adopt the PARCC or use an updated version of the MCAS.³⁴ It is worth noting, however, that Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester serves as Chair of the PARCC Governing Board, so it seems unlikely that Massachusetts will reject PARCC after playing such a major role in its development. That said, a number of states have dropped out of both the

³² Achieve website, <http://www.achieve.org/history-achieve>, accessed May 22, 2014.

³³ It is important to note that the RTTT Assessment funding did not require adoption of the Common Core but a "common set of college- and career-ready standards." "Common set of college- and career-ready standards" is defined within the grant description as "...a set of academic content standards for grades K-12 that (a) define what a student must know and be able to do at each grade level; (b) if mastered, would ensure that the student is college and career-ready (as defined in this notice) by the time of high school graduation; and (c) are substantially identical across all States in a consortium. A State may supplement the common set of college- and career-ready standards with additional content standards, provided that the additional standards do not comprise more than 15 percent of the State's total standards for that content area." Federal Register, Vol. 75, No. 68, Friday, April 9, 2010. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2010-04-09/pdf/2010-8176.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/parcc/>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

PARCC and SBAC consortia in the time since Secretary Duncan announced the awards in 2010.³⁵

States are not limited to PARCC or SBAC. ACT, the non-profit organization that produces the annual ACT exam taken by millions of college applicants, is exploring offering a suite of tests related to the Common Core and two states have worked with textbook provider Pearson to develop state-specific Common Core exams.³⁶

Massachusetts and Education Reform

With the growing national concern over student achievement, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began to review ways to improve its education system in the early 1990s. Massachusetts leadership heard from higher education and business that public school graduates were not prepared for college or skilled employment. Under Governor William Weld and Senate President Thomas Birmingham, Massachusetts adopted the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) in 1993.³⁷ MERA required state-wide standards and assessments. It also mandated that all students pass the state's tenth-grade test, in addition to meeting local requirements, in order to receive a high school diploma. The Act instituted a "Foundation Budget," which provided state funding to ensure equitable spending on education across Massachusetts. All new teachers were required to pass two tests to become certified to teach in the Commonwealth: a test of knowledge of subject content and a communication/literacy skills test. MERA allowed for the establishment of charter schools. It also increased the amount of learning time in schools: 900 hours in elementary schools and 990 hours in secondary schools. Prior to MERA, the only state educational requirements were in history and physical education.³⁸

The standards, initially called the Massachusetts Common Core of Learning, are now known as the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The assessment test is called the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Originally, MCAS tests were only administered in grades 4, 8 and 10, but are now given annually to students in grades 3 through 10.³⁹ Following the passage and implementation of MERA, Massachusetts became a leader in education reform. President Clinton chose Framingham High School to sign the

³⁵ "The National K-12 Testing Landscape," *Education Week*, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-the-national-k-12-testing-landscape.html>, accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁶ Matthew M. Chingos, "Standardized Testing and the Common Core Standards: You Get What You Pay For?" Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, October 2013. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2013/10/30%20cost%20of%20common%20core%20assessments%20chingos/standardized%20testing%20and%20the%20common%20core%20standards_final_print.pdf, accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁷ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chapter 71 of the Acts of 1993, "An Act Establishing the Education Reform Act of 1993," <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/actsResolves/1993/1993acts0071.pdf>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

³⁸ Achieve American Diploma Project Network, *Taking Root - Massachusetts' Lessons for Sustaining the College- and Career-Ready Agenda*, September 2009, <http://www.achieve.org/files/Massachusetts-SustainabilityCaseStudy.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

³⁹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chapter 71 of the Acts of 1993, "An Act Establishing the Education Reform Act of 1993," <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/actsResolves/1993/1993acts0071.pdf>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

1994 reauthorization of the ESEA.⁴⁰ With the implementation of the Frameworks and MCAS, Massachusetts’ students and its education system have led the nation on many objective performance levels.⁴¹ Yet in 2007, after almost a decade of education reform, it became clear that not all students were making adequate progress and that achievement gaps remained among certain groups. In 2005, one-third of Massachusetts public high school graduates enrolling in public higher education were required to take at least one remedial education class at the college level, while 15% had to take two or more.⁴² (As shown on Figure 1, the achievement of African-American and Hispanic students on eighth grade ELA and mathematics MCAS tests continues to lag Asian and White student counterparts.) The 2007 high school graduation rate for the entire state was 80.9%, however Hispanic students were graduating at a rate of only 58.5%.⁴³ The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks were not addressing the achievement gap based on income or race/ethnicity and were not adequately preparing all students for college coursework.

Figure 1

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Results - Percentage of Students in Each Category																								
Grade Eight English Language Arts	2008				2009				2010				2011				2012				2013			
	A	P	NI	W																				
African American/Black Students	4	54	29	13	6	57	25	11	5	54	27	13	7	58	25	11	7	59	25	10	7	54	25	13
Asian Students	22	59	13	5	28	57	11	4	30	55	11	4	34	51	11	4	35	53	9	3	33	52	10	5
Hispanic Students	3	47	32	18	4	52	28	16	5	50	29	16	6	52	27	15	6	53	27	14	6	51	25	18
White Students	14	67	14	4	18	67	12	4	20	64	12	4	23	61	11	4	20	66	10	4	24	61	11	4
Grade Eight Mathematics																								
	2008				2009				2010				2011				2012				2013			
	A	P	NI	W																				
African American/Black Students	5	19	31	46	6	18	31	45	6	22	33	38	7	21	32	39	6	21	36	37	9	24	30	37
Asian Students	39	29	18	13	41	27	20	11	47	27	16	10	48	26	16	10	47	27	17	8	48	29	14	9
Hispanic Students	5	17	28	50	6	16	29	49	7	18	31	43	12	27	33	27	7	20	33	40	8	23	30	39
White Students	22	34	27	17	24	32	27	17	25	33	27	15	27	32	26	16	26	34	27	13	25	36	24	15
A=Advanced; P=Proficient; NI=Needs Improvement; W=Warning/Failing																								
http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/staterc/default.aspx?fyCode=2008																								

Chapter 69, Section 1E of the Massachusetts General Laws requires that the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education “...develop procedures for updating, improving or refining...” the curriculum frameworks. At its September 2007 meeting, the same year that the Council of Chief State School Officers first discussed the concept of national standards, the Board approved a five-year cycle to review the standards for each set of state standards (ELA, math, science/technology/engineering, visual and performing arts, history/social science, health, and foreign languages). The review panels for each Framework would include educators as well as academics from higher education with expertise in the content

⁴⁰ William J. Clinton, “Remarks on Signing the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 in Framingham, Massachusetts,” October 20, 1994, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=49332>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁴¹ For example, Massachusetts ranked first in the nation in math and reading with 8th grade students scoring at or above proficient in the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress. http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/state-performance, accessed May 22, 2014.

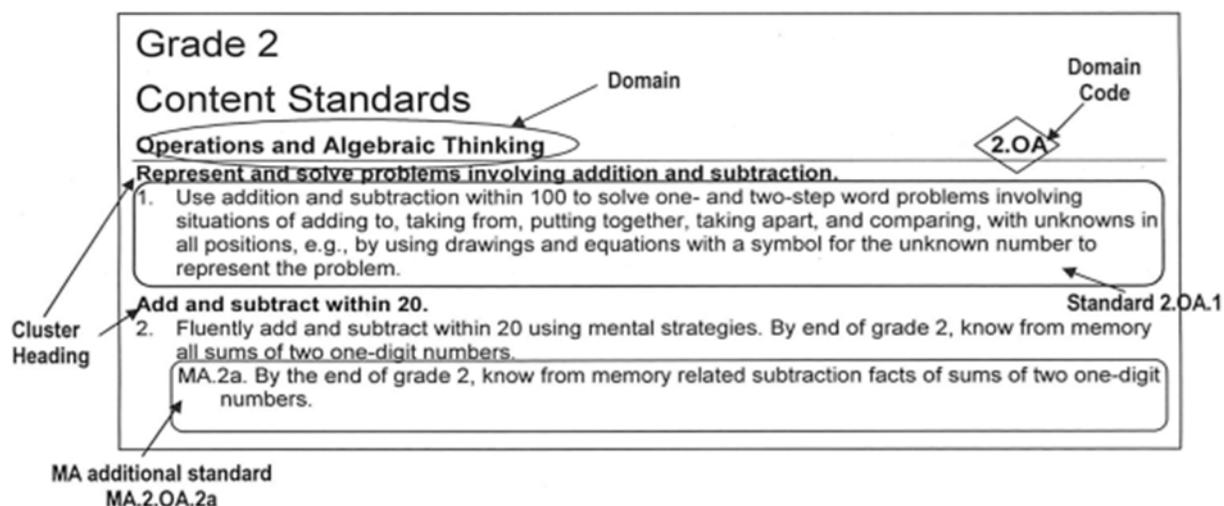
⁴² Carrie Conaway, “College Readiness: Massachusetts Compiles the Data,” *Communities & Banking*, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Spring 2009.

⁴³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, Cohort 2007 Graduation Rates, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/grad/grad_report.aspx?orgcode=00000000&orgtypecode=0&fycode=2007, accessed May 22, 2014.

area. By 2009, both the ELA and mathematics panels had developed working drafts of new Framework standards. As NGA and CCSSO released the Common Core standards, the panels were reconvened to review the Common Core standards and compare them to the draft revisions of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. With one dissent, the ELA panel recommended the Common Core standards over the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks while the mathematics panel opined that the revised Massachusetts standards and the Common Core standards were equally excellent. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) also posted the Common Core standards online for public comment, which resulted in 1,329 potential views to the site and 178 completed surveys. According to Commissioner Mitchell Chester, the majority of respondents rated both the Massachusetts and the Common Core standards as “good” to “excellent” on all factors.⁴⁴

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary & Secondary Education voted to adopt the Common Core State Standards at its July 21, 2010 meeting. The 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks contain the Common Core standards and the additions made by the Commonwealth. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2



Assessing the Common Core

Since its inception, but especially since the implementation of the PARCC and SBAC assessment systems, the Common Core State Standards have faced staunch opposition as well as support. Issues of politics, curriculum, cost, and control have hardened positions on the concept of national educational standards, the Common Core State Standards in particular, and the system of assessment of students, teachers, and schools. While ongoing review and consideration of the Common Core, the assessment process, and the impacts on learning and education processes and outcomes is certainly merited, the polarization of

⁴⁴ “Common Core Standards,” Memorandum from Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner, to Members of the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education, July 16, 2010.

viewpoints and the predetermination of positions have made the debate increasingly disconnected from the actual issues. In the following section, we review, and in some cases rebut, some of the more common perceptions surrounding the Common Core.

Educational Quality

The Common Core reflects a considered and qualified approach to K-12 education. Drafted by education officials, experts, and practitioners, building on a significant body of prior research and experience, the Common Core is an informed policy for building a college and career-ready graduate. The Common Core stresses the importance of understanding complexities, rather than knowing simplicities. Its goal is that each student has a deeper understanding of concepts and not simply rote memorization of processes or outcomes. We see no reason to doubt the Common Core State Standards Initiative's claims that the standards are:

- research- and evidenced-based,
- clear, understandable, and consistent,
- aligned with college and career expectations,
- based on rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills,
- built upon the strengths and lessons of current state standards, and
- informed by other top performing countries in order to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society.⁴⁵

In Massachusetts, critics have suggested that the Common Core is less rigorous than the same subjects in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, first adopted in 2000 (Mathematics) and 2001 (English Language Arts). A Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education study determined that the Common Core and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks standards overlapped by approximately 90%.⁴⁶ In addition to DESE review, in June 2010, two panels appointed by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education composed of Pre-K – 12 and higher education faculty provided independent assessments of the Common Core standards on the basis of content, rigor, clarity, vertical alignment, measurability, college and career readiness, and overall effectiveness. On the English language arts panel, seven of eight members concluded that the Common Core standards were better than the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The mathematics panel concluded that both the Common Core and the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks were equally valid options. Each panel suggested the incorporation of certain additional standards from the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks into any final state-specific Massachusetts Common Core-related standards.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁴⁶ “Common Core Standards,” Memorandum from Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner, to Members of the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education, July 16, 2010 and <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁴⁷ “Report of the English Language Arts Review Panel on the Common Core and Massachusetts Standards,” July 2010, and “Report of the Mathematics Review Panel on the Common Core and Massachusetts Standards,” July 2010.

It is important to note that since December 2010, the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for English language arts and mathematics have been tied to the Common Core, together with a small percentage of Massachusetts-specific standards and features. The *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for English Language Arts and Literacy* and the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Mathematics* were released to local school districts and teachers in March 2011. All school districts were expected to align their curricula to the new standards by the end of the 2012-2013 school year. Despite the shift to new standards, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) results from 2009 through 2013 indicate continued student improvement with level or increasing numbers of students achieving “Proficient” in all grades in English language arts and every grade showing increased numbers of students achieving “Proficient” in Mathematics.⁴⁸ While too early to see the full impact of the new standards, the adoption of the Common Core does not seem to have negatively impacted academic improvement or achievement in Massachusetts schools.

Some have complained that the Common Core does not allow for true academic rigor or achievement, since it does not assume that calculus will be part of each student’s mathematics program of study. Standards identify the minimum level of understanding required, not the maximum level of achievement possible. The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks also did not assume that calculus would be within range of every student.⁴⁹ The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education does provide an “Enhanced High School Pathway to Calculus,” however, which outlines a series of augmented standards (Enhanced Algebra I in Grade 9, Enhanced Geometry in Grade 10, Enhanced Algebra II in Grade 11, and Calculus in Grade 12) by which motivated students can achieve mastery of calculus.⁵⁰

Federal Influence

An oft-repeated refrain among certain critics is that the Common Core, under the label “ObamaCore,” represents unwarranted, and potentially illegal, Federal intrusion into local educational policy and practice. As referenced above, the Common Core derives from conversations about national standards at the CCSSO’s Annual Policy Forum in 2007, nearly two years before Barack Obama became President. While supported by Federal leadership (notably Secretary of Education Arne Duncan) through the Race to the Top discretionary grant program, the Common Core was crafted and disseminated by state associations and state education leaders. State education standards were made mandatory under the Bush Administration’s 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Each state, however, has the authority to develop and adopt its own set of standards. In fact, most states have had educational standards for decades. The Commonwealth of Virginia, for example, has not adopted the Common Core, but instead operates under the Virginia Standards for Learning. The Federal government’s role in the Common Core, and the various assessment

⁴⁸ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Spring 2013 MCAS Tests: Summary of State Results,” September 2013.

⁴⁹ See Massachusetts Mathematics Curriculum Frameworks (2004), Table of Contents, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/math/2000/final.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁵⁰ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Enhanced High School Pathway to Calculus,” <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/EnhancedPathway.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

consortia, has been generally limited to funding, a role that the U.S. government has played for some time in public education. It is disingenuous to suggest that the Common Core, developed by state associations, adopted by individual states, and implemented by local school districts, represents any form of Federal control over curriculum, program of instruction, or instructional material.

Private Sector Influence

While the Common Core State Standards and the various testing consortia are overseen by state governments, supported by experts and professional educators, significant funding was, and is, provided by private foundations, notably the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Achieve, Inc., a bi-partisan, not-for-profit organization founded in 1996, was an important partner to the NGA and CCSSO in the development of the standards and the assessments. Achieve, boasting a mission to raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability to ensure post-secondary school success for all young people, is heavily funded by corporate and individual foundations. It is indisputable that private funding has supported, and sometimes driven, the development and implementation of the Common Core. In education, like religion, health care, anti-poverty efforts, the arts, and the environment, private philanthropy and support has traditionally played a large role. Strikingly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has contributed approximately \$170 million in support of the development and roll-out of the Common Core.⁵¹ Private funding has also fought, sometimes successfully, the implementation of the Common Core. A significant number of private organizations have taken sides, both in support (e.g., U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, American Federation of Teachers) and in opposition (e.g., Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity).⁵² In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) and the Pioneer Institute have espoused positions for (MBAE) and against (Pioneer Institute) the Common Core.⁵³ Funding or support does not necessarily equate to editorial control, however. The drive for national educational standards derived from education policymakers and experts. The sensibility of the argument – common, high standards among states and school districts allowing shared resources, promotion of best practices, national comparisons, and accountability – applies regardless of the origin of the funding. Forty-four states, meaning 44 state education departments, boards of education, and, in some cases, legislatures, have made independent decisions to adopt the Common Core.⁵⁴ Clearly, many experts and practitioners believe that the Common Core standards offer some enhancement to state educational practices.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Valerie Strauss, “Gates Foundation pours millions into Common Core in 2013,” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/11/27/gates-foundation-pours-millions-into-common-core-in-2013/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁵² For US Chamber of Commerce, see <http://www.businessforcore.org/>, accessed on May 22, 2014, for American Federation of Teachers, see <http://www.aft.org/issues/standards/nationalstandards/>, accessed on May 22, 2014, for Cato Institute, see <http://www.cato.org/research/public-schools>, accessed on May 22, 2014, for Americans for Prosperity, see http://americansforprosperityfoundation.com/files/NtK_56_Common_Core.pdf, accessed on May 22, 2014.

⁵³ For MBAE, see http://www.mbae.org/resources_news/legislations/, accessed on May 22, 2014, and for Pioneer Institute, see <http://pioneerinstitute.org/common-core/>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

⁵⁴ Some have argued that states only adopted the Common Core in order to qualify for Race to the Top funding or secure waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act. However, neither Maine nor North Dakota applied for Race to the Top funding yet adopted the Common Core, while Texas and Alaska both received NCLB waivers and did not adopt

The Role of Literature

A growing criticism of the Common Core relates not to the standards but to the appendices. Common Core provides basic levels of understanding. It does not dictate content or curriculum. However, the *Common Core for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* offers a series of appendices. The Common Core standards do not require any student to read any individual text. Common Core does provide Appendix B, a list of exemplar readings for the type, quality, and rigor for specific age groups. Certain opponents have used that list to criticize the standards as a prescribed reading list that diminishes local control of curriculum and is too weighted on technical/informational readings instead of basic literature. The argument over Appendix B ignores two basic facts: 1) a suggested reading list is not a required reading list, and school districts and teachers will decide the reading content in the classroom; and 2) the standards are intentionally tailored to English language arts *and* literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. The reading materials listed in Appendix B are recommended for inclusion in and among a wide range of subjects, not simply English classes, to ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of quality literary works in multiple formats and topics. All teachers will be held accountable for incorporating Common Core reading standards – history teachers will incorporate historical documents, social studies teachers will incorporate newspapers and commentaries, and science teachers will incorporate technical readings. Yet great works of literature, poetry, and drama will remain fundamental to the student learning experience, especially in English classes, unless local school officials and teachers determine otherwise.

Cost of Implementation

There is no conclusive analysis of the potential cost of the full implementation of the Common Core and its affiliated assessment processes. The challenge is that 14,000 diverse and independent school districts collectively spend \$500 billion every year.⁵⁶ A number of factors play into the cost equation. Expenditures around the Common Core primarily relate to professional development for educators, new instructional materials, and technical upgrades for online assessing. While school budgets generally include these cost categories on an annual basis, depending on a school district or State's regular level of investment, and existing technical capacity, adaptation to the Common Core may prove relatively simple or costly and complex. A small number of organizations have undertaken studies of the cost of the Common Core. Some of these organizations have been vocal advocates (Thomas B. Fordham Institute) while others have been vocal critics (Pioneer Institute) of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute projects a

the Common Core. Additionally, only 17 states and the District of Columbia received RITT funding yet 44 states continue to use the Common Core as the basis for their educational standards.

⁵⁵ Despite the rhetoric, polls show that a large majority of teachers support the Common Core educational standards. In 2013, both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association conducted polls of their memberships and found that 75% of responding teachers support the Common Core. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals, more than 80% of responding principals from Common Core states agree that the Common Core has the potential to improve conceptual understanding. Gallup/Education Week found that 58% of responding superintendents say the Common Core will improve the quality of education in their community and 75% believe the standards will provide more consistency in the quality of education between school districts and states. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/recent-polls-common-core-teachers-in-favor-anne-obrien>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁵⁶ US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/did/www/schooldistricts/>, accessed May 22, 2014.

range from \$3.0 billion for a low cost alternative incorporating online professional development and open source instructional materials to \$12.1 billion for a comprehensive overhaul of education programming to comply with the Common Core.⁵⁷ In its low-cost scenario, the Fordham Institute posits that the cost could actually be absorbed in current annual spending on instructional materials, assessment, and professional development. Pioneer Institute, however, projects a mid-range cost of \$15.8 billion across states participating in the Common Core.⁵⁸

Cost is unquestionably an important concern regarding the transition to the Common Core. States and school districts must carefully review, project, and account for anticipated new costs. Keep in mind, however, that Massachusetts has already begun its shift to the Common Core. Teachers have begun training and students have begun learning under the new methods. Admittedly, in most cases, the cost of the assessments (the cost of sufficient technology upgrades as well as annual student testing costs) remains unrealized. However, some have argued that participation in the PARCC consortia and a national set of standards will provide some cost savings through bulk purchasing opportunities and shared open-source educational materials. Costs do not seem to be a definitive or deciding factor in the implementation of the Common Core or its assessment.

The Limits of Testing

Assessment, while an essential element of a rigorous standards initiative, impacts time available for instruction and challenges students struggling to maintain interest in school. A great deal is expected of PARCC, SBAC, and other assessment programs for the Common Core. As an assessment of mastery of educational standards, the tests themselves must be valid, reliable, and appropriate. Students must be able to understand the testing format. Assessments must be comprehensive and regular, yet not overwhelm. Assessments must test educational outcomes, but not drive the educational content.

Even more is expected from the new education assessment tests. As a result of No Child Left Behind, the assessments must measure school quality. They must track outcomes by demographic and economic measures. And, under Race to the Top, they must assess the teachers.

In the nearly four hundred year history of public education in America, Race to the Top is the first major initiative to insist on a quantifiable measurement of teacher quality based on student achievement. In conjunction with the assessment of students, RTTT requires that student achievement scores (on PARCC, SBAC, or any similar assessment system) be used to evaluate teaching quality.⁵⁹ Teachers will be held accountable for student outcomes. RTTT, however, only applies to the 21 states and the District of Columbia that received funding. Under NCLB, school districts and schools are held accountable for

⁵⁷ Patrick Murphy and Elliott Regenstein with Keith McNamara, “Putting a Price Tag on the Common Core: How Much Will Smart Implementation Cost?” Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, May 2012.

⁵⁸ AccountabilityWorks, “National Cost of Aligning States and Localities to the Common Core Standards: A Pioneer Institute and American Principles Project White Paper,” Boston, MA: Pioneer Institute Public Policy Research, No. 82, February 2012.

⁵⁹ US Department of Education, *Race to the Top Program Executive Summary*, November 2009, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

student achievement through Adequate Yearly Progress measurements. The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act holds school districts accountable for the quality of their individual schools and student achievement.⁶⁰ Only under RTTT are the teachers themselves identified as accountable for student achievement.

Understandably, educators and their unions are concerned about the approach. While the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers showed strong support for the Common Core upon its release, each organization has expressed concern about implementation of the teacher evaluation process based on classroom outcomes. In struggling school districts, teachers often compete against non-school influences for student time and attention. The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation was released in January 2012. The Model measures teachers against four standards: curriculum, planning and assessment; teaching all students; family and community engagement; and professional culture. 603 CMR 35.00, the controlling regulations approved by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary & Secondary Education in June 2011, requires that student academic progress be considered as part of teacher evaluations. Neither the Model nor the regulations clarify the role of assessment results in that process.

Recommendations

The Commonwealth, and Greater Worcester, should continue working toward full implementation of the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks based on the Common Core and standards-based assessments for students, teachers, and schools. It represents the best thinking on educational policy and learning standards by national, state, and local leaders. In Massachusetts, it is enhanced by the Commonwealth's unique experience with educational standards and assessments. It offers a national experience for best practices to achieve higher-level learning by all students.

However, The Research Bureau offers targeted recommendations for improvement.

- The Commonwealth should continue to promote the full range of academic subjects under the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. While the Common Core focuses on mathematics and English language arts, the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks cover such diverse subjects as foreign languages, health, history and social science, science and technology/engineering, and vocational technical education. The Commonwealth should continue to provide and update standards for all major subjects. A singular focus on mathematics and English language arts, and the potential for schools to be assessed only on those subjects, creates a dangerous incentive for schools to overemphasize mathematics and English language arts to the detriment of other subjects. Too much school time and class time may be spent “teaching to the test.” Testing is important, and ELA and mathematics are appropriate priority subjects, but the way to ensure that all subjects are given due

⁶⁰ Massachusetts districts and schools are classified according to five accountability and assistance levels, with the highest performing in Level 1 and the lowest performing in Level 5. The Massachusetts Progress and Performance Index (PPI) incorporates information about narrowing proficiency gaps, growth, and graduation and drop-out rates to generate a single number. The overall student population, and in particular the high needs students, must have a cumulative PPI of 75 or higher for a district or school to be viewed as making progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps.

attention is to ensure that the Commonwealth continues to set standards of learning for all subjects and assess mastery of the same.

- The Commonwealth should modify or augment any Massachusetts-based assessment tests, such as PARCC, to incorporate Massachusetts-specific standards. Under Common Core, each state can incorporate up to 15% of additional standards per subject area. The revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks includes state-specific content in addition to the Common Core standards.⁶¹ In order to ensure that this additional content is adequately covered by school districts and teachers, the additional content must be included in the assessment process. Massachusetts must work with the PARCC consortium to ensure that each state has the capability of including additional state-specific standards into the testing process.
- The Commonwealth and local school districts should coordinate on a capital plan for assessing existing technology, upgrading out-of-date systems, and procuring new equipment, potentially through the Massachusetts School Building Authority. In addition to the technology, however, school districts must ensure that testing proctors are trained and familiar with the necessary technology. Students, too, must be taught basic computer skills and typing to ensure a familiarity with the testing systems. Online testing is an appropriate next step in elementary and secondary school assessments. Students, however, must be prepared for the type of online interaction required by the new tests. Educational modules can offer introductions and practice with both computers and typing. The form of the test should not influence the student achievement measured.
- Local school districts should make all testing results available to administrators, teachers, and parents. Currently, individual MCAS results are sent to a student's home for review. Parents are able to review their son or daughter's scores and compare those scores to those of contemporaries throughout the State, the school district, and the individual school. The results include an overview of strengths and weaknesses by and within subject matter as well as a question-by-question review of answers given by the student and the correct answer. Since each MCAS test is posted online upon completion, parents can review each question their student scored incorrectly and discuss with the student and/or the teacher. The PARCC should provide that same level of information on an individual basis, with the potential expansion to include comparison to contemporaries in other states. Sharing individual results with students, teachers, and parents allows the test to be included as part of an enriched learning experience. It is a critical part of parent engagement.⁶²
- The Commonwealth should review the current timeline for the use of student assessment test results to assess student, teacher, and school performance. While the revised Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks were released in March 2011, the first opportunity to incorporate the new standards was the 2012/2013 school

⁶¹ Please see "Massachusetts Side-by-Side Comparison Documents," <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/>, accessed on May 22, 2014.

⁶² Some critics have expressed privacy concerns over the assessments. PARCC is a consortium of its member states. According to the PARCC Data Privacy & Security Policy, individual states will retain responsibility and control over student personal data, which may include student name, gender, race/ethnicity, free/reduced lunch status, parent name, address, etc. PARCC and its contractors will require state approval to access any personally identifiable information. Personally identifiable information will be managed by state and Federal law. For more information about Massachusetts policy see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edwin/analytics/accesspolicy.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

year. That left little time for teachers to undergo training, become familiar with the new standards, draft new lesson plans, and focus on student instruction. The 2013/2014 school year – the current school year – included both PARCC field testing and MCAS testing for many, limiting teacher and school administrator ability to focus on a unified new educational program. During the 2014/2015 school year, school districts will choose whether to administer MCAS or PARCC.⁶³ Only after the completion of the 2014/2015 school year will the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education determine whether the Commonwealth moves forward with the PARCC assessment system or an independent system such as a revised MCAS. Until the new assessment system is fully established, students are familiarized with the testing process, and school officials and teachers are clear on expectations for evaluation, the Commonwealth should not rely on the assessment process for measuring broad systemic outcomes. Ultimately, school districts and teachers should be held accountable. However, true accountability requires clear expectations and reliable measures of outcomes. Until the assessment process is deemed reliable, and its role in teacher and school district evaluations are clear, it should not be used to measure system quality.

- The Commonwealth should establish a defined evaluation and public review process of the new Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the new assessment program. Contributing to the confusion over the Common Core is that Massachusetts’ most important decision on the issue occurred in July 2010, yet the local conversation is only now underway as a result of PARCC field testing. In 2010, when Massachusetts adopted the Common Core, there was limited public awareness of the implications of the vote. While experts in the field realized that adoption of the Common Core would change the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS system, parents and the general public were not as mindful of the impact. According to Commissioner Chester in his introductions to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for both Mathematics and English Language Arts & Literacy, “All Massachusetts frameworks are subject to continuous review and improvement, for the benefit of the students of the Commonwealth.”⁶⁴ In light of public questions over the efficacy of the Common Core standards compared with the original Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, and Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 69, Section 1E, a clear, established reevaluation process will ensure that the Commonwealth is committed to maintaining a comprehensive and high quality educational system.

⁶³ Massachusetts Department & Elementary & Secondary Education, “Frequently Asked Questions about the 2013-2014 PARCC Field Test, Updated January 15, 2014,” <http://www.doe.mass.edu/parcc/CommTool/FAQ.pdf>, accessed May 22, 2014.

⁶⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, “Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts & Literacy,” March 2011, and “Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for Mathematics,” March 2011.

Glossary of Acronyms

AYP – Adequate Yearly Progress: The measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

CCSSO – The Council of Chief State School Officers: Nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of state public education officials overseeing elementary and secondary education that provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues.

DESE – Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: State Department that sets policy for public elementary and high schools in the Commonwealth.

ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act: First passed in 1965, this Act, reauthorized regularly, serves as controlling legislation for all Federal education programs.

MCAS – Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: The test system currently used by the Commonwealth to measure student mastery of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

MERA – Massachusetts Education Reform Act: Passed in 1993, the Act provided for comprehensive reform of the state’s education system, including the authorization of standards and assessments for K-12 education, the provision of more equitable funding of education, and the requirement that teachers pass two tests for licensure – a general competency test and a subject-area test.

NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress: First given in 1969, NAEP is known as the Nation’s Report Card. It is a national assessment of educational achievement in key subjects using a representative sampling of American students.

NCLB – No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Act required education standards in each state, assessment of student mastery of the standards through testing, and yearly progress in student achievement.

NGA – National Governors Association: A bipartisan, nonprofit organization of the nation’s governors that advocates for state interests and shares best practices in public policy.

PARCC – Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers: One of two state consortia formed to develop assessment tests for the Common Core State Standards.

RTTT – Race to the Top: A U.S. Department of Education grant competition that distributed more than four billion dollars to support education innovation and reform in the states.

SBAC – Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: One of two state consortia formed to develop assessment tests for the Common Core State Standards.

Recommended Readings

1. To review the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects visit <http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/>.
2. To review the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Mathematics and English Language Arts & Literacy aligned with the Common Core visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/>.
3. To read the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act visit <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg27.pdf>.
4. To read the No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001 visit the US Department of Education website at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.
5. To view the rubric used to evaluate a state's Race to the Top application and learn how the US Department of Education reviewers scored the applications read <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/scoringrubric.pdf> and <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>.
6. For further information on Massachusetts education reform and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edreform/>. To read the Act in its entirety visit <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/actsResolves/1993/1993acts0071.pdf>.
7. To take a practice PARCC test visit <http://www.parcconline.org/>. To review how Massachusetts is testing the PARCC exam in districts and schools visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/parcc/> and <http://www.parcconline.org/massachusetts>.
8. To view sample SBAC test questions visit the SBAC website at <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks/>.
9. To understand Massachusetts practice on student information and data collection visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edwin/analytics/>.

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