

# WebMemo



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## National Education Standards and Tests: Big Expense, Little Value

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The federal Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant program awarded \$4.35 billion among select states, giving preference on grant applications to those states that agreed to adopt national education standards and tests. Moreover, the Obama Administration has suggested making federal Title I funding contingent upon adoption of national standards—a move that would provide no new funding for standards and assessment implementation but would effectively mandate their adoption by withholding federal funding for low-income schools.

While this carrot-and-stick approach to the adoption of standards and assessments is a cause for concern, it could also require more new spending at a time when state budgets are severely strained. The National Association of State Budget Officers reports that as of November 2010, 22 states projected budget shortfalls for fiscal year 2012 totaling approximately \$40 billion.<sup>1</sup> The new funding appropriated through the RTTT program will fall short of the total cost of overhauling existing state assessments.

**RTTT Funding for Common Standards and Assessments.** Eleven states and the District of Columbia won a total of \$4.35 billion through RTTT. The competition, which was divided into two rounds, invited states to submit applications for funding. Delaware and Tennessee were the only two states to win grants in round one, taking home \$100 million and \$500 million, respectively. The other nine states—Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island—and the District of Columbia

divided \$3.4 billion in federal grant money. The remaining \$350 million was set aside for the creation of common assessments aligned with the new standards.<sup>2</sup>

RTTT awards ranged from \$75 million for Rhode Island and Washington, D.C., to \$700 million for Florida and New York. In addition to the \$4 billion in RTTT funding, two consortia of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium—divided the remaining \$350 million in RTTT funding—\$170 million and \$160 million, respectively—to develop common assessments.<sup>3</sup>

Although RTTT funding created enough of an incentive during a time of state budget shortfalls for a majority of states to sign on to national standards and tests, the funding will likely fall far short of the investments that taxpayers have already made in state accountability systems. The limited RTT funding for states and \$350 million for consortia to develop new assessments aligned with the Common Core standards is unlikely to cover the entire cost associated with the overhaul of state accountability systems—including implementation of standards

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and testing and the professional development and curriculum restructuring to go along with them.

These costs have not been adequately discussed. Instead, the seed funding could create yet another strain on state budgets—or yet more clamoring for federal money to finish the job of conforming to the national standards and assessments.

**Spending on Standards and Assessment Systems: Selected States.** The budgetary impact of jettisoning state accountability structures and replacing existing standards and testing could be significant—likely much more than RTTT funding provides.

Over the past decade, taxpayers have spent considerable sums to develop existing state accountability systems:

- **California.** California's Standardized Testing and Reporting Program, which began in 1998, tests students in grades 2–11 in English, math, science, social science, and history. Estimates suggest that it would cost California taxpayers \$1.6 billion to replace the existing state standards with the Common Core standards.<sup>4</sup> Yet California has agreed to overhaul its existing system with the new national standards and assessments.
- **Florida.** The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test measures student achievement in grades 3–11 in reading, math, and science. Since 1996, Florida has spent more than \$404 million to

develop and maintain the system.<sup>5</sup> Taxpayer investment in the existing high-quality assessments has been substantial, and overhauling the system for unproven national assessments, which Florida has agreed to adopt, could produce significant new implementation costs to taxpayers.

- **Texas.** Texas has resisted the push for national standards. The Lone Star State estimates that the adoption of new standards and tests would cost taxpayers upwards of \$3 billion. “Adopting national standards and tests would also require the purchase of new textbooks, assessments, and professional development tools, costing Texas taxpayers an estimated \$3 billion, on top of the billions of dollars Texas has already invested in developing our strong standards,” stated Governor Rick Perry (R) in a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in opposition to national standards and tests.<sup>6</sup>
- **Virginia.** The Virginia Board of Education unanimously rejected adoption of the proposed Common Core State Standards and tests. One of the board's chief arguments against adopting national standards was fiscal, with members noting that “Virginia's investment in the Standards of Learning [SOL] since 1995 far exceeds the \$250 million Virginia potentially could have received by abandoning the SOL and competing in phase two of Race to the Top.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, since 1996, Virginia taxpayers have paid more than \$379

1. National Governors Association and National Association of State Budget Officers, *The Fiscal Survey of the States, Fall 2010*, at <http://www.nasbo.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=C6q1M3kxaEY%3d&tabid=38> (February 18, 2011).
2. Press release, “Nine States and District of Columbia Win Second Round of Race to the Top Grants,” U.S. Department of Education, August 24, 2010, at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/nine-states-and-district-columbia-win-second-round-race-top-grants> (February 18, 2011).
3. Press release, “U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan Announces Winners of Competition to Improve Student Assessments,” U.S. Department of Education, September 2, 2010, at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-secretary-education-duncan-announces-winners-competition-improve-student-asse> (February 18, 2011).
4. EdSource, “California and the Common Core: Will There Be a New Debate About K-12 Standards?” June 2010, at [http://www.edsource.org/pub\\_common-core.html](http://www.edsource.org/pub_common-core.html) (February 17, 2011).
5. Florida Department of Education, “The Financial Cost of the FCAT,” at <http://fcats.fldoe.org/pdf/FinCostofFCAT.pdf> (February 17, 2011).
6. Governor Rick Perry, letter to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, January 13, 2010, at <http://governor.state.tx.us/files/press-office/O-DuncanArne201001130344.pdf> (February 17, 2011).
7. Press release, “Board of Education Reaffirms Support for SOLs; Opposes Imposition of National Standards,” Virginia Department of Education, June 24, 2010, at [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/news/news\\_releases/2010/jun24.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/news/news_releases/2010/jun24.shtml) (February 17, 2011).

million to develop and implement the state SOLs. The costs for developing the SOLs include expenditures for the initial development and subsequent revisions of the curriculum frameworks and assessments, as well as the development of new supporting materials and professional development related to using the new testing system.

**Resisting the Push for Further Federal Overreach.** As of February 2011, seven states—Alaska, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Texas, and Virginia—have yet to sign on to the adoption of national academic standards and tests. They would be wise, both for fiscal reasons and in the interest of maintaining state authority over education, to continue to stand strong in their opposition.

Incoming governors and state leaders could also bring with them opposition to the national standards agenda. State school chiefs across the country, favoring a return to local control and federalism in education, will likely also resist the effort to further centralize education policy. Their resistance will be well-founded. If the Obama Administration is successful in its push for national education standards and tests, the federal government will have further overstepped its bounds by intervening in local school curriculum matters.

**The Right Path to High-Quality Standards and Assessments.** Instead of throwing out existing assessments developed at great taxpayer expense for unproven national standards and tests, state policymakers should:

- *Strengthen existing state-based accountability systems.* State leaders should follow the example of states like Florida, Massachusetts, and Virginia and create strong state standards and tests. State leaders should work to continually raise standards by raising achievement levels, ensuring appropriate learning sequencing, and requiring teachers to demonstrate subject-matter mastery.
- *Provide information to parents and taxpayers about school performance.* To make assessments meaningful, information about school performance should be publicized and easily accessible to parents and taxpayers. Standards, cut scores, school performance, and definitions of proficiency should all be readily available.
- *Empower parents to act.* Once parents are equipped with information about school and student performance based on solid state standards and assessments, they should be empowered to use that information to choose a school that best meets their children's needs.

Federal policymakers should likewise resist further federal involvement in education and should:

- *Empower states with funding flexibility in exchange for transparency.* Instead of providing more federal funding with strings attached—such as national education standards and tests—policymakers in Washington should pursue avenues to maximize transparency of state assessment systems. Federal policymakers should free states from the bureaucratic red tape handed down from Washington and permit state leaders to use federal education funding in a manner that best meets local needs.

**Questionable Value.** Pressure by the Obama Administration, using the carrot of incentives (RTTT) and the stick of proposed penalties (denial of access to Title I funding), to induce states to sign on to the common standards initiative raises serious questions about further federal involvement in standards-setting and assessments. The Common Core standards would further burden already overstrained state budgets. Developing and overhauling state accountability systems will be far more costly and of questionable value during a time of budget shortfalls nationwide.

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