



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

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### National Academic Standards

#### *At a Glance*

*Currently, every state has its own set of academic standards, but that may soon change. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers are spearheading a state-led process that will lead to the development and voluntary adoption of K-12 national reading and math standards. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have signed on to the process. This Information Capsule describes the Common Core State Standards Initiative and reviews advantages and disadvantages of national standards.*

One of the education reforms currently making news throughout the country is the development of national academic standards. Currently, every state has its own set of academic standards, but adoption of national standards would result in uniform goals for what American students should learn each year. National standards would define exactly what students are expected to know by the time they complete each grade level, regardless of the state within which they reside or the school they attend. The countries that consistently outperform the United States on international assessments all have national standards. For years, the United States has struggled to find the right approach to academic standards for K-12 education. As far back as the 1840s, Horace Mann advocated the creation of “common schools” that would adopt the same curriculum and standards. More recently, Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton both called for national academic standards and national tests in the public schools, but their proposals were rejected by Congress, who preferred to let states maintain control over their own educational policies (Cottle et al., 2009; Isaacson, 2009; Miners, 2009; Stutz, 2009; Weingarten, 2009; American Federation of Teachers, 2008; Finn, 2005; Ravitch, 2005; Education Commission of the States, 2002).

#### **The Current System: No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires that all students become proficient in reading and math by 2014, but lets each state set its own proficiency standards and choose its own tests to measure achievement. As a consequence, the quality of academic standards varies greatly from state to state, subject to subject, and grade to grade. Students and schools determined to be failing in one state might get passing grades in another state (Isaacson, 2009; Pope & Quaid, 2009; American Federation of Teachers, 2008; Lewin, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Center for Public Education, 2006). Gerald Tirozzi, Executive Director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, claimed: “The irony is that we have 50 states, which have 50 different definitions of proficiency, and NCLB never describes what is meant by proficient” (Manzo, 2008).

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Some educators claim that NCLB has actually created an incentive for states to lower their standards. If states set their standards high, more students and schools will be labeled as failing. If they set their standards low, fewer schools and students will receive such a label (Cottle et al., 2009; Isaacson, 2009; The Journal Gazette, 2009; Lewin, 2007). This contention was supported when the American Federation of Teachers (2008) examined each state's standards in the four core content areas: English, math, science, and social studies. The study found that only one state, Virginia, met the Federation's criteria for strong standards at all grade levels and in all four subjects.

Further confirmation that states are setting low standards comes from a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007). The study applied a methodology for mapping state proficiency standards in reading and math onto the appropriate National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale. NAEP scores are categorized at the Basic (partial mastery of knowledge and skills), Proficient (demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter), or Advanced (superior performance) achievement levels. The researchers found that the majority of states they studied set their math proficiency scores at a level that was equivalent to well below NAEP's Proficient achievement level. In reading, all of the state tests' proficiency scores were lower than NAEP's. In other words, students rated as proficient on their state's assessments were rated below the Proficient achievement level on NAEP. The authors concluded there was no significant correlation between where states set their proficiency standards and students' performance on the NAEP. [On a cautionary note: Other researchers have criticized this study on methodological grounds. They maintain that NAEP and state assessments have different objectives and measure different knowledge and skills. They contend, therefore, that comparisons of the proficiency scores on the two tests may not be meaningful (Center for Public Education, 2008; Stullich et al., 2007).]

Table 1 compares the proficiency scores of Florida's FCAT and the NAEP. The table displays the estimated 2005 NAEP scores that were equivalent to proficiency (Achievement Level 3 or higher) on Florida's 2005 FCAT, based on National Center for Education Statistics (2007) data. The NAEP Proficient cutoff score and the range of proficiency standards across all states are also provided. As can be seen in the table, Florida set its FCAT proficiency cutoff scores below NAEP's Proficient scores in both subjects and grade levels. For example, the 2005 NAEP score that was equivalent to a Level 3 FCAT score was 202, although NAEP's cutoff score for Proficient was set at 238. Across all states in the U.S., grade 4 reading proficiency cutoff scores ranged from 161 to 234 (i.e., all states' equivalent proficiency scores were below NAEP's Proficient score).

Table 1. NAEP Scores Equivalent to FCAT Proficiency, NAEP Proficiency Cutoff Scores, and Range of Cutoff Scores Across States, 2005

	<b>NAEP Score Equivalent to FCAT Proficiency*</b>	<b>NAEP Proficiency Cutoff Score</b>	<b>Range of Cutoff Scores Across States</b>
Grade 4 Reading	202	238	161-234
Grade 8 Reading	265	281	217-278
Grade 4 Math	230	249	200-255
Grade 8 Math	269	299	230-310

\* FCAT Proficiency = Achievement Level 3 or higher.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

## Common Core State Standards Initiative

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is being jointly led by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in partnership with Achieve, ACT, and the College Board. Governors and state education commissioners from across the country have committed to joining a process that will develop a common core of standards in English-language arts and math for grades K-12. The standards will be research- and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked, aligned with college and work expectations, and include rigorous content and skills. States will be able to voluntarily adopt the common standards and may choose to include additional standards as long as the common core represents at least 85 percent of the state's standards in English-language arts and math. Once English-language arts and math standards are developed, common standards in science and possibly other subject areas will be developed. The initiative will provide states with the flexibility to choose their own curricula and teaching methods (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009).

The initiative is a state-led, not federal, effort; however, the NGA and CCSSO are encouraging the federal government to provide states with financial support. For example, the federal government can provide financial incentives to states who effectively implement the national standards and long-term financial support for the development of common assessments. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has already pledged up to \$350 million in federal stimulus funds for the development of common assessments (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009).

Forty-six states, representing over 80 percent of the nation's K-12 student population, have formally joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have also agreed to take part in the process (National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009).

Four states - Alaska, Missouri, South Carolina, and Texas - have declined to participate in the initiative. Alaska has chosen to "monitor but not yet actively participate" in the process. Missouri may join the process once a new commissioner of education is named, provided that the state is permitted to implement higher standards than those agreed to at the national level. South Carolina's superintendent of education, but not the state's governor, signed on to the process. The state's education department said it is preparing to incorporate the common standards even if South Carolina isn't officially part of the national initiative. Texas recently approved new English and math standards and developed and ordered new testing materials and textbooks as a result. According to a spokesperson for the Texas Education Agency, adopting another new set of standards could cost the state up to \$3 billion (Braden, 2009; Holland, 2009; McNeil, 2009; Stutz, 2009).

The Common Core State Standards Initiative consists of several work groups and project phases:

- The Standards Development Work Group, composed of content experts from Achieve, ACT, and the College Board, will develop the national standards. Although the group's deliberations will be confidential, states and national education organizations will have an opportunity to review and provide feedback on draft documents produced throughout the process. A completed draft of the college and career ready standards is expected this summer and a draft of standards for grades K-12 is scheduled for release in December 2009.
- A Feedback Group will inform the standards development process by offering input on draft documents. The group will play an advisory, not decision-making, role in the process. Members of the Feedback Group include professors of English and mathematics and experts in research methodology, standards, and student testing.

- A Validation Committee comprised of national and international experts who are neutral to and independent of the process will review the standards to ensure that they are research- and evidence-based. Members of the committee will be selected by governors and chief education officers of the participating states. The committee will also validate states' adoption of the national standards.
- The NGA and CCSSO will convene a National Policy Forum comprised of national educational organizations (such as the National School Boards Association, Council of Great City Schools, National Association of State Boards of Education, and National Education Association). The forum will share ideas, gather input, and help to coordinate states' implementation and adoption of the national standards.
- Once the common standards have been developed, states will then have the opportunity to adopt the standards or align them with their current content standards. In early 2010, states will be asked to submit their timeline and process for adopting the standards. States will be asked to implement the standards within three years.
- Standards will be updated regularly. There will be an ongoing state-led development process that supports continuous improvement of the first version of standards.
- After states adopt the national standards, the NGA and CCSSO will work to ensure that instructional materials that are aligned to the standards are developed and that educators are provided with the resources and time they need to adjust their classroom practices to the new standards.
- The NGA and CCSSO will work with states that adopt the standards to develop a proposal to create common assessments in English-language arts and math. Education Secretary Arne Duncan pledged up to \$350 million in federal stimulus funds for the development of tests that will gauge whether students are meeting the new standards.

A Common Core State Standards Initiative Web site, [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org), provides more information and regular updates on the status of the initiative.

### **Advantages of National Standards**

The National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council of Great City Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Federation of Teachers have all endorsed the idea that the nation should set a common definition of what students should know and be able to do (Hoff, 2009). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated: "What you've seen over the past couple [of] years is a growing recognition from political leaders, educators, unions, nonprofits - literally every sector - coming to realize that 50 states doing their own thing doesn't make sense" (Pope & Quaid, 2009).

Proponents of national standards claim they will (Isaacson, 2009; King, 2009; National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009; Stutz, 2009; Weingarten, 2009; American Federation of Teachers, 2008; Stullich et al., 2007; Kosar, 2006):

- ensure that all students receive an equally rigorous education;
- result in a commonly understood set of expectations for all students;
- clearly articulate expectations to teachers, parents, and the general public;
- hold all schools equally accountable;
- make it easier to compare student performance from state to state;
- make it easier to compare American students to students from around the world;
- support students transitioning between states;

- help parents and administrators identify successful schools;
- help states better evaluate policy changes and identify best practices;
- allow educators in different states to more easily share best practices to improve teaching and learning;
- allow educators to align textbooks, digital media, and curricula to internationally benchmarked standards;
- ensure that teacher pre-service and professional development are based on identified needs and best practices;
- ensure that teachers are effectively trained, objectively judged, and provided with proven teaching tools and curricula;
- permit the gathering of consistent data to determine which school and classroom practices are most effective;
- resolve disputes about different teaching methods, such as whether the phonics or whole-language approach to reading is most effective;
- ensure that curriculum and instruction are aligned with assessments; and
- allow states to save millions of dollars by administering common assessments (states currently spend over \$1 billion developing and administering their own assessments).

### **Disadvantages of National Standards**

Efforts to establish national education standards have failed in the past because many policymakers and educators are reluctant to allow the federal government to dictate what students throughout the nation should learn in school. Critics of national standards cite the following concerns (Hoff, 2009; The Journal Gazette, 2009; Khadaroo, 2009; Miners, 2009; Pope & Quaid, 2009; Rogers, 2009; Stutz, 2009; Weingarten, 2009; Kosar, 2006; Education Commission of the States, 2002):

- national standards are not necessarily synonymous with high standards;
- state boards of education will lose control over their curriculum standards;
- schools are more effective under local leadership, not mandates from politicians in Washington;
- teachers may be forced to provide instruction in a scripted manner, unable to tailor lessons to their students' individual needs or use their own judgment of what and how to teach;
- states will have to adopt new textbooks and revise their accountability tests to match the new standards;
- national standards will lead to political battles over content in areas such as evolution, temperance, and sex education;
- getting states to actually adopt a common set of standards will be difficult; and
- national standards will do little to increase student achievement without the implementation of other key policies, such as effective teacher pre-service and professional development and the alignment of curriculum and assessment.

### **Summary**

The quality of academic standards varies greatly from state to state. The American Federation of Teachers reported that only one state met its criteria for strong standards at all grade levels and in all four core subject areas. The National Center for Education Statistics concluded that students rated as proficient on their state's accountability tests were usually rated as below proficient on the nation's report card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The No Child Left Behind Act allows each state to set its own proficiency standards, but highly regarded educational organizations are beginning to endorse the idea that there should be a common definition of what all students should know and be expected to do at every grade level. The Common Core State Standards Initiative, jointly led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State

School Officers, is a state-led process that is developing national standards in language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have signed on to the process. A draft of the K-12 standards is expected to be released in December 2009 and states will then have the option of voluntarily adopting the national standards.

This Information Capsule reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of national standards. Commonly cited advantages include providing all students with an equally rigorous education regardless of their zip code; making it easier to compare student performance from state to state and from the U.S. to around the world; and allowing educators in different states to share best practices. Most criticisms of national standards center around a reluctance to allow the federal government to dictate what students should learn. Other concerns include political battles over content in areas such as evolution and forcing teachers to provide instruction in a scripted manner, with little or no regard for individual students' strengths and weaknesses.

*All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net> under the "Current Publications" menu.*

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