

POLICY NOTES

News from the ETS Policy Information Center

Volume 21, Number 2
Policy Evaluation &
Research Center

Fall 2013



Taking Action: Navigating the Common Core State Standards and Assessments



In this Issue

For decades, American education reformers have wrestled with two intertwined challenges: an excellence problem — how to improve the ranking of the nation's students on international gauges of educational performance; and an equity problem — how to close the persistent achievement gaps that divide poor and minority students from their more affluent White and Asian peers.

(continued on page 11)

In 1983, President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education published its now-famous report on public schooling, *A Nation at Risk*, warning of "a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future." The report kicked off the modern American education reform movement. Over the last 30 years, that movement has focused on two interrelated challenges. The first, laid out in *A Nation at Risk*, concerns the standing of American students in relation to students from other countries: how to ensure that the United States' educational system measures up against international competitors. The second challenge, tackled in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, concerns the standing of American students in relation to each other: how to close the persistent achievement gaps that divide poor and minority students from their more affluent White and Asian peers.

These two questions — the first about excellence, the second about equity — inform the nation’s latest education reform initiative, the implementation of the state-developed Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English and mathematics, which spell out what students should know and be able to do after 13 years of schooling. The CCSS have been adopted by 45 states, several U.S. territories and the District of Columbia and are set for full implementation during the 2014–2015 school year, when two federally funded consortia, each comprising about half of the participating states, plan to launch tests that will measure student performance against the new standards. But in the 30 years since *A Nation at Risk* was published, American educational progress has been halting, said speakers at a recent ETS conference on the CCSS, and it is not yet clear whether the nation’s teacher corps has been trained to deliver instruction with the depth and rigor that the new approach demands. It remains to be seen whether the new standards will be “a great awakening — or yet one more thing that will do less for our children than we hoped,” College Board® President **David Coleman** told attendees.

“It is rigorous work, worth doing every day, that builds the conditions for kids to become excellent. It’s hard work, but not just any hard work — hard work on the things that matter most to prepare you.”

– David Coleman, president, College Board

The challenges and opportunities that the new standards and tests present were the subject of the conference “Taking Action: Navigating the Common Core State Standards and Assessments,” held at ETS headquarters in Princeton, N.J., on February 9. Co-convened by ETS and the National Urban League, the conference featured presentations from educators,

advocates and test developers speaking before an audience of about 70, its numbers thinned by a major east coast blizzard the day before. The public session, the third in a series of “Saturdays at ETS” conferences, followed two days of private meetings at ETS that brought together researchers, funders, advocates and local school officials to discuss the progress of the National Urban League’s three-year-old Equity and Excellence Project. The Gates Foundation-funded project aims to improve educational outcomes for poor and minority students in struggling schools, partly through effective implementation of the CCSS.

“We’ve had some progress on improving student achievement, but it’s fallen short of what the public investment has been. It seems to me we still are a nation at risk.”

– Melvin Johnson, professor of economics,
Tennessee State University

The reform movement begun by *A Nation at Risk* has vastly increased the federal role in education, traditionally a state responsibility, but despite billions in spending and untold hours of effort by educators, advocates and politicians, the movement has thus far failed to satisfy the high hopes it raised, said conference speaker **Melvin Johnson**, former president and current professor of economics at Tennessee State University. One-quarter of American eighth-graders score below basic proficiency in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and teenagers in other countries outperform U.S. students on international tests, especially in math and science. In American colleges, half of all undergraduates take at least one remedial course. “We’ve had some progress on improving student achievement, but it’s fallen short of what the public investment has actually been,” Johnson said. “It seems to me we still are a nation at risk.”

Nowhere is that failure more apparent than in the stubborn persistence of achievement gaps between rich and poor, minority and White, speakers said. High school graduation rates stand at 83 percent for Whites but only 66 percent for African Americans, Johnson said.

“That so many diverse states have arrived at a consensus on such a contentious matter during one of the most politically polarized and dysfunctional eras in our history is a testament to the quality of the Common Core State Standards.”

*— Melvin Johnson, professor of economics,
Tennessee State University*

Twenty years ago, an African-American student had a 1 in 150 chance of scoring among the top 5 percent of students taking the SAT® college-entrance exam, the College Board’s Coleman told the audience during a breakfast talk the day before the February 9 conference. Today, that statistic has worsened to 1 in 192, Coleman said, adding, “We’re not close to the level of educational performance we need from these children.” Even among high achievers, low-income and minority students are less likely than their more affluent White and Asian peers to pursue educational opportunities. Of the students whose PSAT/NMSQT® scores predict likely success on Advanced Placement® (AP®) exams, only 30 percent of African Americans and Latinos go on to take AP® classes, Coleman said, compared with 40 percent of Whites and 60 percent of Asians. And 80 percent of high-achieving but low-income students apply to only one college. “They do not claim the futures that they have earned,” he said.

The continued struggles of so many American children can be traced to the failings of the nation’s public schools, said conference keynote speaker **George**



Melvin Johnson, Professor of Economics, Tennessee State University

Pruitt, the president of New Jersey’s Thomas Edison State College, which uses flexible and nontraditional means to provide higher education to adults. “Public education in this country has failed — totally, miserably — particularly in urban areas,” Pruitt said. As an African-American high school student in Chicago in the early 1960s, he participated in a school boycott designed to pressure the district into hiring Black administrators. The boycotters believed that “if people that looked like us were in charge of the schools, that we would get better treatment — that we would take better care of our children than the people that didn’t look like us,” Pruitt said. “That assumption was wrong.” As the quality of schooling declined over the decades, administrators attributed the problems to poverty, Pruitt said, ignoring their own responsibility for school failure. “It’s an excuse and it’s a copout,” he said. “We are full of

excuses and copouts, because we are now invested in the system, and the system will defend itself.”

“Public education in this country has failed — totally, miserably — particularly in urban areas.”

— George Pruitt, president, Thomas Edison State College

Fifty school systems

Because public schooling in the United States has traditionally been a state and local responsibility, there has been little uniformity in how and what students learn in different states, or even different towns within the same state, conference speakers noted. In some urban schools, students receive no serious math instruction, said Pruitt, the New Jersey college president; inevitably, those students do poorly on standardized tests that present little problem to peers with three years of math. (“The difference is not because they’re Black,” Pruitt said dryly.) Even before the federal No Child Left Behind law required states to adopt academic standards and to ensure that ever-increasing numbers of students passed annual tests linked to them, many states had already begun standards-based reform efforts. But NCLB allowed each state to design its own standards and set its own passing scores on tests; unsurprisingly, what resulted were wide variations in the scope and rigor of schooling. Leaving education up to state and local authorities “resulted in 50 separate state school systems and, essentially, 50 different sets of expectations about what students should know and what they should be able to do,” said Johnson, the Tennessee State economics professor. “What is considered college- and career-ready in one state can be no such thing in another.”

By 2009, dissatisfaction with these disparities, and concern over their impact on the United States’



George Pruitt, President, Thomas Edison State College

international competitiveness, were widespread. That year, all but two states signed a memorandum of agreement with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to promote development of a new, uniform set of curriculum standards, said conference speaker **Doug Sovde**, of Achieve, Inc. Sovde serves as director of Instructional Supports and Educator Engagement for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of the two consortia developing tests linked to the new standards. A little more than a year later — “essentially light speed for creating a set of standards,” Sovde said — the English and math standards were finished; science standards currently are under development. Although outlining what students should learn inevitably requires judgment calls — “It’s not a purely scientific endeavor,” Sovde said — the CCSS developers relied on evidence to ground their decisions about such matters as grade-to-grade progression and the

alignment of the K–12 curriculum with the demands of college and the workplace. The completed standards were benchmarked against those of high-performing countries and were found to be “95 percent aligned,” Sovde said. “That so many diverse states have arrived at a consensus on such a contentious matter during one of the most politically polarized and dysfunctional eras in our history is a testament to the quality of the Common Core State Standards,” said Johnson, the Tennessee State economist.

Although the CCSS are not national standards — they were developed by states and adopted voluntarily, albeit with financial incentives from the Obama administration’s Race to the Top grant program — proponents see them as a vehicle for ensuring that students everywhere encounter the same academic opportunities and leave high school prepared for college-level work, rather than non-credit remedial courses. “The challenge of the 21st century is to educate more children to higher levels than we ever have before, to dig deeper into our talent pool to perhaps find the next cure for cancer, to find the next eradicator of hunger,” said conference participant **T. Beth Glenn**, the NAACP’s National Education Director.

“What is considered college- and career-ready in one state can be no such thing in another.”

*– Melvin Johnson, professor of economics,
Tennessee State University*

In theory, once the CCSS are in place, teachers in cities, suburbs and rural areas will all cover the same material in the same order; students who move from state to state or town to town will not risk arriving too late to read Shakespeare or learn long division. And with all students measured against the same yardstick, lagging teachers, districts or states will not be able to hide their

poor performance. “Everybody gets access to the same information, the same set of expectations,” Sovde said. “This endeavor is first and foremost an equity agenda. It’s giving kids, every kid, the opportunity they deserve.”

“The challenge of the 21st century is to educate more children to higher levels than we ever have before, to dig deeper into our talent pool to perhaps find the next cure for cancer, to find the next eradicator of hunger.”

– T. Beth Glenn, national education director, NAACP

The CCSS are intended to be more focused, coherent and rigorous than the standards that states began adopting in the 1990s, said Sovde and conference speaker **Joe Willhoft**, Executive Director of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, the second of the two state consortia designing CCSS-linked tests. The aim is to transform the educational culture of the nation’s public schools, replacing the traditional emphasis on covering a wide range of topics, often superficially, with a new commitment to deeper thought about what is most important, speakers said.

In math, the standards follow the practice of high-performing countries by focusing on fewer topics in far greater depth, said Coleman, who before taking the helm of the College Board in 2012 was a key architect of the CCSS. In the early grades, the standards home in on whole numbers and their operations; in the later grades, on fractions and proportional reasoning. Students will have to develop fluency with math facts and operations — skills that are honed through practice and memorization — and also to think creatively about applying math to real-life problems. “Our mission is to dare to focus, in mathematics, on the few things that matter most, and then demand a higher level of rigor in relation to those things,” Coleman said. The conference

audience got a taste of what that could mean when speaker **Robert Moses**, the founder and president of the Algebra Project, a nonprofit organization that uses math instruction as an organizing tool to ensure quality public school education for every child in America, put his listeners to work in small groups on an apparently simple assignment that turned out to be surprisingly complex: using a number line to explore the evidence for a basic fact about the addition of positive and negative integers. “You’re talking about going deep, you’re talking about doing less, you’re talking about getting kids to think, to read carefully,” Moses said. “It’s more than a notion.”

“There is, in fact, not necessarily a pure right answer, but there are accurate answers and there are good explanations about how you made that choice. That’s really the way we apply mathematics in the real world.”

*– Joe Willhoft, executive director,
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium*

In reading, the new standards require that, from their earliest years in school, students encounter nonfiction texts about science, history and the arts — a shift from current practice, in which the youngest students read mostly fiction. Researchers once believed that students would flourish as long as they learned to read well by third grade, Coleman said, but eighth-grade reading scores are linked to the general knowledge students acquire earlier in their schooling. When the curriculum includes little nonfiction, disadvantaged students never make up for the deficits in vocabulary and general knowledge they brought with them to kindergarten, Coleman said. Last year, Coleman and the CCSS came under fire, with critics claiming that the new emphasis on nonfiction would narrow the curriculum and banish literature from the classroom. But in his

remarks to the ETS audience, Coleman insisted that the new core curriculum will continue to include plenty of stories, which teach young students about sequence and characterization. Rather than narrowing the curriculum, the CCSS actually broaden it, he said.

“You’re talking about going deep, you’re talking about doing less, you’re talking about getting kids to think, to read carefully. It’s more than a notion.”

*– Robert Moses, founder and president,
The Algebra Project*

In writing, the CCSS require students to make evidence-based arguments about what they read, in place of the opinion essays and personal narratives that currently make up the bulk of upper-grade writing assignments. “People love personal narratives, because they think they are good for Black and brown children,” Coleman said. “There are very few first-year college courses where an essay about yourself passes the course, but it’s the most popular form of writing in the American high school.” The CCSS are designed to equip students for college and the workplace, where claims backed up by data — not personal anecdotes and unsupported opinions — carry the day, he said.

Assessments worth taking

Just as the new standards call for more depth and rigor, so too will the new assessments linked to them, Sovde and Willhoft said; administering the tests online permits cost-effective electronic scoring of more complicated and meaningful questions. “The age of ‘bubble in your answer’ with respect to large-scale assessment, I think, is coming to an end,” Sovde said. “Kids are going to be asked to engage in much more constructed response, to demonstrate their thinking, to provide evidence for how they came to a particular conclusion.”

Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced are designing assessments that include more extended and complex tasks than current standardized tests typically allow; the biggest difference between the two consortia is that PARCC's tests will ask the same questions of all students, while Smarter Balanced's tests will be adaptive, with success or failure on earlier questions determining which later questions a student sees.

Ideally, the tests themselves will be learning experiences: "We want these assessments to be assessments worth taking, worth spending the time on," Sovde said. Traditionally, students are taught to think of fractions as pieces of pizza or slices of pie, but PARCC's math test might ask third graders to click-and-drag a fraction to the correct spot on a number line, reinforcing the crucial mathematical principle that fractions are numbers. Sixth graders might encounter a Smarter Balanced performance task asking them to decide whether a class should plan a field trip to the zoo, the aquarium or the museum, taking into account admission fees, the cost of bus travel, and the range of student preferences captured on an opinion survey. "There is, in fact, not necessarily a pure right answer, but there are accurate answers and there are good explanations about how you made that choice," Willhoft said. "That's really the way we apply mathematics in the real world."

To ensure that the new tests advance reformers' equity goals, conference participants noted, test developers must avoid unintentionally replicating the cultural biases that, some testing critics assert, have undermined the validity of older standardized tests, setting students up for failure and reinforcing pernicious stereotypes of racial inferiority. "We don't want to have another set of assessments to concretize the notion of who can and who can't because of the tests themselves," said conference audience member **Cecilia Griffin Golden**, the state coordinator of the

Pennsylvania Urban League's Equity and Excellence Project. Both testing consortia are acutely aware of the potential problem, Sovde and Willhoft said, and are already taking steps to avoid it. A PARCC math question about soybean fields was rewritten to feature a flower garden, Sovde said, to avoid introducing a term that might confuse students living far from the agricultural heartland. But similar confusion could arise over even the Smarter Balanced field-trip task, Willhoft acknowledged: "There are a lot of urban school districts in this country [where] nobody in the district has taken a field trip in 10 years," he said.

"These assessments will have a level of expectation of student performance that will likely be well beyond what any state currently experiences."

*— Joe Willhoft, executive director,
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium*

To head off potential problems, Smarter Balanced plans to have teachers deliver a half-hour scene-setting lesson before its tests, to ensure that all students understand the context of the performance tasks — for example, what a field trip is. During this spring's pilot testing, Smarter Balanced will compare the performance of students who were exposed to a scene-setting lesson with the performance of those who were not, Willhoft said. "This issue is paramount to PARCC, and I know it is to Smarter Balanced as well," Sovde said. "The last thing we want to do is reify the system as it is and disadvantage anybody."

The new standards and tests are significantly more challenging than those used in the past, the test developers warned. "These assessments will have a level of expectation of student performance that will likely be well beyond what any state currently experiences," Willhoft said. Meeting those



Patricia Stokes, President and CEO, Urban League of Middle Tennessee

expectations will require overhauling instruction; the rote memorization and drill-and-kill test preparation methods of the past will not suffice under the new regime, said the NAACP's Glenn. Indeed, CCSS advocates are counting on the pressure of the new standards and tests to force improvements in curriculum and instruction for all students, whether their schools are rich or poor, successful or struggling. "We're hoping that by changing what and how we test, we're also changing what and how we teach, and we're changing how students learn," Glenn said. This across-the-board pressure for improved instruction is the engine that will drive progress on the reformers' excellence and equity goals, conference speakers made clear. "It is rigorous work, worth doing every day, that builds the conditions for kids to become excellent," said the College Board's Coleman. "It's hard work, but not just any hard work — hard work on the things that matter most to prepare you."

A heavy lift

Achieving the reformers' goals will require overcoming some significant obstacles, conference speakers acknowledged. One potential roadblock is technology: PARCC and Smarter Balanced are designing their tests — not only their end-of-year assessments, but also the interim and diagnostic tests that teachers can use to refine instruction — to be delivered online, although Smarter Balanced will also offer a pencil-and-paper alternative for the first three years. Officials of both consortia say that the new assessments do not require especially abundant or sophisticated technology: schools will be able to administer the tests even if they do not have a computer for every student, and even if their computers and Internet connections lack up-to-the-minute capabilities. "The tests are being designed to really be able to be delivered with relatively old hardware and relatively thin bandwidth," Willhoft said. In fact, he added, the computer-based nature of the test can help ensure greater equity, since any required tools can be built into the test itself. "Everybody gets the same calculator," Willhoft said. "We don't have some kids in some schools with some little freebie calculator they got from the credit union, that was donated to the school, and then other schools, they have the graphing calculator with all the bells and all the whistles."

"The tests are being designed to really be able to be delivered with relatively old hardware and relatively thin bandwidth."

*— Joe Willhoft, executive director,
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium*

Still, even modest technological requirements may be beyond the reach of some schools, conference speakers said. "Many of the schools in the communities we represent don't have the technological infrastructure either to implement the assessments the way that

they were designed right now or to benefit maximally from all the assessments could do,” said the NAACP’s Glenn. The two testing consortia have encouraged their member states to survey districts and schools about their technological capacity and to begin any necessary upgrades. Community members can play a crucial role in advocating for such upgrades, advised conference participant **Patricia Stokes**, president and CEO of the Urban League of Middle Tennessee.

“The success of this depends on instruction and how well that’s delivered.”

*– Patricia Stokes, president and CEO,
Urban League of Middle Tennessee*

More daunting than the technological challenge is the question of whether the nation’s teachers are prepared to deliver the deep and rigorous instruction that the new standards demand, conference speakers said. “The success of this depends on instruction and how well that’s delivered,” Stokes noted. Internationally, high-performing countries succeed not because of their academic standards and testing regimens, but because they attract their best and brightest minds into teaching, argued conference audience member **Dylan William**, a former ETS researcher. “In Finland, there are universities where it’s tougher to get into the teacher training program than it is to get into medical school,” he said.

For the CCSS to be effective, teachers will need intensive professional development to ensure that they can deliver a new kind of instruction — and that demand comes just as economic pressures are shrinking budgets for professional development, conference speakers said. “We don’t have teachers and we don’t have materials that do that, and we have nothing on the table to produce them,” said Moses,

the Algebra Project founder. “There is no program I know of in this country, no national program, that says, ‘Look, we’re going to hold the kids up to these standards, and this is how we’re going to get the teachers who are going to be able to deliver on this.’” Indeed, that is the question that keeps him awake at night, said Sovde of PARCC. “I think this is a heavy, heavy lift for this country, to raise up the importance of what educators do and make sure that they have the training that they need to do it well, and then the continued support to keep doing it well,” he said.

The imperative to produce teachers capable of teaching to the enhanced standards lends new urgency to the task of helping institutions that train teachers, among them the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that produce half of the nation’s Black teachers. Participants in the two days of meetings that preceded the public ETS conference heard from University of Pennsylvania education professor **Marybeth Gasman**, who is launching a grant-funded Center for the Study of Minority-Serving Institutions, defined in federal law as those colleges and universities whose enrollment includes a high proportion — usually at least 25 percent — of members of specific minority groups. ETS plans to support Gasman’s new center, in an effort “to bolster and strengthen these institutions, so that they can actually teach teachers to do a better job,” said ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles**, a conference participant. The 565 minority-serving institutions enroll 3.8 million undergraduates, about 20 percent of the U.S. total, and a disproportionate number of the country’s minority college students, Gasman said. “As the country becomes more and more diverse, why not look to these institutions?” she said. “They have a long history of working with students of color.”

Even as they embrace the promise of the new standards, advocates worry that raising the bar for student achievement, as the CCSS do, risks a backlash

from both ends of the political spectrum. Concerned about what they see as long-standing efforts to undermine support for public schools and divert resources to privatized alternatives, some advocates worry that poor student performance on the new CCSS-linked tests could serve as a pretext for continued attack. "If we use this as a political opportunity to dismantle public schooling, we will have missed an opportunity to actually improve our learning system," said Glenn of the NAACP. But fear of such a result could itself short-circuit progress on the equity goals that the CCSS are designed to promote, warned the College Board's Coleman. On the left, some may return to familiar arguments that testing itself harms minority children, or that imposing universal academic standards is culturally insensitive, said Coleman. Because he is a White man, "there are arguments that you can make that I cannot make," he told his largely African-American audience, urging them to reach out to minority parents and make the case for the importance of the CCSS.

"I think this is a heavy, heavy lift for this country, to raise up the importance of what educators do and make sure that they have the training that they need to do it well, and then the continued support to keep doing it well."

– Doug Sovde, director, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)

Conference participants also worried that imposing the new, higher standards without offering schools additional resources with which to meet them could undermine progress toward reformers' equity and excellence goals: overburdened schools could resort to cheating outright, or to gaming the system by pushing low-achieving students out of school before test day, negative practices that critics of the No Child

Left Behind law blamed on that earlier standards-and-testing regimen. Still, although the United States remains the only developed country that spends less on the education of its least advantaged students than on the education of its wealthiest ones, as former ETS researcher Wiliam noted, economic realities constrain the call for more spending on schools, some conference participants acknowledged. "I believe we need more resources," the College Board's Coleman told his audience, "but politically and socially, my friends, this is not a powerful stance for you to occupy." Instead, advocates need to focus their efforts around "figuring how to take the bazillions of dollars that we put in education and redirecting it to children," said Pruitt, the New Jersey college president.

Hope for progress

No matter how rigorous, focused and coherent, academic standards alone will not deliver a good education, noted conference speaker Johnson, the Tennessee State economist. Standards cannot substitute for well-designed curricula, effective instruction, safe schools, committed teachers and parents, and motivated students. "If we're not careful, we can have excellent standards and still not deliver a high-quality education," he warned.

Therefore, realizing the promise of the CCSS demands advocacy, conference participants said. In a rapidly globalizing world, the United States cannot afford to leave talent undeveloped, speakers said: the country needs qualified workers and well-educated citizens. "This is *the* national security issue," said Villanova University history professor **Maghan Keita**, chairman of the College Board's Board of Trustees, who addressed the audience a day before the public conference. The crucial role that education plays in ensuring the nation's economic competitiveness makes the business

community an important pro-reform constituency whose resources advocates should tap, said Sovde, who works for PARCC on assignment from Achieve, the education-reform nonprofit founded in the mid-1990s by political and business leaders. Entrenched school bureaucracies resist change, noted Pruitt, and with schools sometimes the biggest employers in disadvantaged communities, advocates need to appeal to institutions like churches to support the interests of children, even when that means opposing the interests of adults. “People will rally around that. It’s not rocket science,” Pruitt said. “It’s hard, though.”

“If we’re not careful, we can have excellent standards and still not deliver a high-quality education.”

*— Melvin Johnson, professor of economics,
Tennessee State University*

Despite the difficult work ahead, conference speakers argued that the CCSS offer real hope for progress on both excellence and equity — for simultaneously improving the overall quality of American education and closing the achievement gaps separating advantaged and disadvantaged children. Because the CCSS embody genuinely high intellectual expectations, students who do well on tests linked to the CCSS will be truly prepared for college and the world of work, speakers said. “[If] they hit this mark, they won’t be stuck in remedial courses when they get to postsecondary education. They won’t be stuck in dead-end jobs that have no opportunity for advancement, for benefits, to be able to support a family,” said Sovde of PARCC. “They hit these standards, and they set the trajectory of their lives.”



In this Issue

(continued from page 1)

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) — state-developed academic standards in English and mathematics that spell out what students should know and be able to do after 13 years of schooling — offer a new way to meet both of these challenges, advocates say. The CCSS, which have been adopted by 45 states, several U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, aim to take action on reformers’ excellence agenda by ensuring that American students are exposed to a curriculum as rigorous as that offered in the highest-performing countries. And because the new standards will shape the curriculum offered to all students, regardless of race or class, proponents believe that implementing the CCSS’s excellence agenda will also promote progress on an equity agenda — the narrowing of race- and income-linked achievement gaps that have stubbornly persisted despite years of reform efforts and millions in taxpayer-financed spending.

But as two federally funded consortia develop the tests that will assess students’ performance against the new standards, the ambitious reform effort that the CCSS embody faces potential pitfalls. The new tests, expected to be in place by 2014–2015, will be delivered online, and some struggling schools may lack the technological infrastructure to take full advantage of the new approach. More significantly, it remains an open question whether the nation’s teachers are prepared to teach with the rigor and depth that the new standards demand. Unless these challenges are met, advocates say, the CCSS could become another broken promise, undermining support for public education and reinforcing negative stereotypes of low-income minority children. Realizing the promise of the new approach, and avoiding its potential



Rosedale Road
MS 19-R
Princeton, NJ 08541-0001

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
US POSTAGE
PAID
EDUCATIONAL
TESTING SERVICE

ETS *Policy Notes* is published by the ETS Policy Information Center Educational Testing Service Rosedale Road, MS 19-R Princeton, NJ 08541-0001 609-734-5212

email: pic@ets.org

www.ets.org/research/pic

This article was written by Deborah Yaffe.

Copyright © 2013 by Educational Testing Service. All rights reserved.

Educational Testing Service is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer.

ETS, the ETS logo and LISTENING. LEARNING. LEADING. are registered trademarks of Educational Testing Service (ETS). All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. 23438

In this Issue

(continued from page 11)

dangers, will require concerted effort from educators, advocates and political leaders.

That was the message of “Taking Action: Navigating the Common Core State Standards and Assessments,” a conference held at ETS headquarters in Princeton, N.J., on February 9, 2013. The conference, co-convened by ETS and the National Urban League, featured presentations from educators, advocates and test developers. NAACP National Education Director **T. Beth Glenn** and ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles** made introductory remarks, and **George Pruitt**, president of Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey, delivered the keynote address. Sessions were moderated by **Melvin Johnson**, professor of economics at Tennessee State University, and

Patricia Stokes, president and CEO of the Urban League of Middle Tennessee.

The public session, the third in a series of “Saturdays at ETS” conferences, followed two days of private meetings that brought together researchers, funders, advocates and local school officials to discuss the progress of the National Urban League’s Equity and Excellence Project. The project, funded by the Gates Foundation, aims to improve educational outcomes for poor and minority students, in part by working toward effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

More information about the conference, including PowerPoint slides, can be found at http://www.ets.org/s/achievement_gap/conferences/saturday_taking_action/overview.html