

The standards' emphasis on college and career readiness suggests a breakdown of barriers between business education and other academic disciplines.

The Common Core Standards Initiative and How It Might Impact Business Educators

BY JOANNE M. LOZAR GLENN

Suppose you're running a high hurdles race. You're not very tall, but if you're allowed to set the height of the hurdle and the time of the race, you'll probably come out all right. Now extend this privilege to all the racers. It's a sure bet that everyone's "achievement" will be very different.

That's analogous to what happened with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), explains Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education (Washington, D.C.), one of five organizations initially involved in proposing a process for developing a common set of national learning standards (see "Business Spotlight, pp. 10).

"NCLB required all states to adopt a level of proficiency and reach it by 2014," Wise says. "But everybody's idea of proficiency was different. It led to moving farther apart [in our ideas about] what our children need [to be successful]."

Wise says the business community had long been vocal about its inability to get entry-level workers who had the skills necessary for the modern economy. Nor did they understand why a disparity existed in skill levels of workers from different states. And colleges were reporting that about one-third of first-year students needed remediation (Boyd, 2010).

The Common Core State Standards Initiative was an attempt to answer the question "What does it mean to be college- and career-ready?" The initiative began small, with conversations among governors, teachers, businesses, and schools. However when 48 governors and chief state school officers expressed their interest in the effort, it snowballed into a state-led initiative that within a year produced a 66-page document of "focused, coherent, clear, and rigorous" standards that were internationally benchmarked, anchored in college and career readiness, grounded in evidence and research, and supported by numerous professional organizations (Achieve, 2010). At press time, the standards had been adopted by 30 U.S. states and territories.

Genesis and Milestones

You can trace the work of the common initiative to the work of the American Diploma Project Network, which the education reform organization Achieve (Washington, D.C.) began in 2005 to improve postsecondary education. Achieve played a key role in convening governors and state commissioners of education and engaging them in dialogue that led to a commitment to develop common, national standards of education for K-12 English-language arts and mathematics (see box, "Fast Facts"). The writing effort began in spring 2009, led by the Washington, D.C.-based National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

The standards writers paid a lot of attention to standards in other countries that performed well on international assessments of math and English, according to Mike Cohen, Achieve's president. Instead of the "mile-wide, inch-deep" approach common to many U.S. states (so-described by Michigan State University professor of education Bill Schmidt), the writers adopted a linear approach to academic content development.

"High-performing countries heavily focused on [introducing] a few topics at each grade level [and teaching them] in great depth so that students become procedurally efficient but also understand mathematically what [the procedure] means," Cohen

says. “The notion of a clear grade-by-grade progression is hugely important. The core standards are patterned heavily on [standards common] in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea—countries that have consistently outperformed the U.S.”

Writers also consulted business leaders and professional education organizations such as the American Council on Education, the National Council of

Teachers of English, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Information from the ACT WorkKeys job skills assessment system and from work done by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills was also incorporated into the common core. Though the National Business Education Association (NBEA) was not consulted, one source noted awareness of career education standards and said his organization,

with the Department of Education, was trying to “figure out how to take [those kinds of standards] into consideration.”

In March 2010 a draft version of the standards was offered for public comment (more than 10,000 were received and used to inform the final product). On June 2, 2010, the final document was released; the reaction was mixed. Kentucky and Maryland, for example, were the first to endorse the standards (Birnbaum, 2010); Virginia declined to adopt (Virginia Department of Education, 2010); and North Dakota will review the standards from June 2010 to January 2011 (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2010). As of July 30, 2010, 30 states had come aboard, making them eligible to apply for Federal funds scheduled to be disbursed to cooperating states in September 2010 (see sidebar, “Race to the Top”). Incidentally, states are permitted to adopt the common core as 85% of their standards and add up to 15% more at their own discretion.

Fast Facts: Common Core State Standards Initiative

What: State-led effort to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare U.S. students for college and the workforce.

Who: Led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Focus: College and career readiness “anchor standards” for English language arts (reading, language, speaking, and listening) and mathematics.

Initiated: Spring 2009.

Released: June 2, 2010.

Status: States are determining whether to adopt and how to implement. States that adopt may have additional standards, as long as the common core represents at least 85% of their English and math standards. To date, 30 states have adopted. The testing industry is standing by, as two consortia of states compete for Federal dollars to develop common assessments.

Timeline: 2010–13: adoption, professional development, and implementation; 2014–15: national assessments.

Impact: On achievement, to be determined, but supporters expect educational equity via expectations that are consistent for all “and not dependent on a student’s zip code.” On school faculty, seems to offer opportunities to break down silos between business educators and core academic disciplines, because of the standards’ emphasis on career readiness and its inclusion of standards for informational text and its integration of media and technology literacy.

Ongoing governance: To be determined, though the Alliance for Excellent Education, with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, will play a key role.

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Orchids and Onions

The standards—and the standards development process—received praise and criticism.

Supporters argued that irregular achievement points to a need to remedy differences in how states define proficiency, so that students can receive equal educations regardless of where they reside. At-risk populations will particularly benefit, they say. National standards will make it easier to share good ideas and curriculum, and the fight for good standards will be carried out on “one battlefield instead of 50” (*New York Times*, 2010).

Critics believe that the standards equalize mediocrity, labeling them “diploma ready,” rather than college and career ready (*New York Times*, 2010) and saying they short-change content in favor of skills (Gewertz, 2010). And even though the effort was state-led with no direct federal involvement, some opponents take a “states’ rights” view, seeing the standards as an attempt to nationalize education decisions (Gewertz, 2010),

Race to the Top a Carrot for Adopting Common Core Standards

Race to the Top is a \$4.35 billion competitive grant program from the U.S. Department of Education. It's the carrot in the Common Core Standards Initiative, designed to encourage and reward states that are implementing significant reforms in the four education areas described in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: (1) enhancing standards and assessments, (2) improving the collection and use of data, (3) increasing teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution, and (4) turning around struggling schools.

Adoption of the standards, of course, is voluntary. But qualification for Race to the Top funds was strongly connected to the adoption and implementation of these standards. States that adopted the standards by August 2, 2010, were eligible to apply for funds, and adopting national standards earned states "points" in the evaluation process.

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U.S. Dept. of Education. (2010, May 27). Race to the top program: Guidance and frequently asked questions. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/faq.pdf>

whereas others take issue with the international benchmarking process. Alfie Kohn, for example, was quoted as saying that both high-scoring and low-scoring countries have centralized, standards-based education systems—and that standards are a marketing ploy promoted by the textbook publishing and testing industries (*New York Times*, 2010).

The public feedback process drew fire as well. Though public comment was invited, it lasted only a few weeks, according to *Education Week* reporter Catherine Gewertz, and it came late in the development process. Many wanted the NGA Center and the CCSSO to release all 10,000 individual comments, rather than summarizing them.

Then the Thomas B. Fordham Institute added ire to the fire when it conducted an independent review comparing state standards to those of the common core. In its report released on July 21, 2010, reviewers graded states' English and math standards, ranking the common core standards better than

English standards in 37 states and better than math standards in 39 states. The reviewers gave English standards from the state of California, the District of Columbia, and Indiana an "A" and designated them "clearly superior to the common core;" no states had math standards superior to the common core. English standards from Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas, Colorado, Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Virginia, Alabama, Arizona, and Florida, and math standards from California, the District of Columbia, Florida, Indiana, Washington, Georgia, Michigan, Utah, Alabama, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Oregon were rated "too close to call," receiving grades ranging from "A-" to "B+." The remainder of states, judged "clearly inferior to the common core," earned grades ranging from "C" to "F." Among the worst-rated ("F") in English were Alaska, Delaware, Iowa, Montana, and Nebraska, and in math, Kansas, Montana, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (Fagan, 2010).

Ironically, some states that received "inferior" ratings on the Fordham review had contended that their standards and assessments were more rigorous than those of the common core.

Questions Remain

Adoption of the standards is only the first step in what could be a long road to changing the achievement picture in the United States. Questions remain about the nuts and bolts of implementing the standards. What kind of support will teachers receive in professional development? In the wake of declining school budgets, and if states do not win "Race to the Top" funds, who will pay for the training? How will new standards impact textbook adoption? What impact will adoption of the core standards have on the testing industry, because how else will achievement of the standards be measured? Finally, who will ensure that the standards keep pace with changes that will impact what being ready for college and career means five to ten years from now?

"Since the ink is not yet dry," Cohen says, "right now [updating] the standards is not a matter of urgency," adding that most states update every five to seven years. As for testing, part of the "Race to the Top" funds will be given to a consortium of states to develop common assessments. Cohen says that two consortia are competing—the application went in on June 23. "Achieve is supporting one of them as a core partner," he says. "Grants will [have been] awarded by September 30, and the assumption is that two grants will be awarded."

Why two potentially different common assessments? "Think of it this way," Cohen says. "Right now we have 50 state tests. These tests will replace the state tests, so we might end up with two [instead of 50]. Also [a common assessment developed by states] doesn't raise the specter of a Federal test. There'll be lots of cooperation and discussion across the two consortia, lots of opportunities to help, talk with, and learn from each other and to assure that the tests are designed so that the results can



States adopting the common core standards as of DATE. Source: <http://corestandards.org/in-the-states>

be compared to each other.”

Cohen says there is a push for the tests to be innovative and to measure higher-order skills; so from a Federal point of view, maybe it’s better to invest in two baskets. The tests are expected to be implemented in 2014–15.

Questions also remain about whether the NAEP test (“the nation’s report card”) and TIMMS (the international benchmark), which have served as standardized, independent measures of performance across state and international borders, will change to reflect national standards.

“There are two schools of thought,” Cohen says. “NAEP, for probably close to two decades, has performed an audit function and provides one measure that tells us trends in achievement over the long term.” So one argument presses for keeping NAEP the same.

The other side of the argument, he explains, is this: “If states are adopting common standards, wouldn’t you want the nation’s report card based on whether those kids are meeting those standards...so shouldn’t we assure that NAEP is also aligned with those standards?”

Cohen thinks that the NGA Center is probably beginning to address those arguments. As for TIMMS, according to the NGA Center’s Director of Education Dane Linn, it would seem to be important to tie standards to international benchmarks and focus on identifying performance gaps. This suggests that, though NAEP might or might not change, TIMMS will probably remain the same.

Linn admits that raising the bar alone will not raise test scores. “It’s important for states to get serious about

putting supports in place to help students improve [achievement] against those higher standards.” States have agreed to implement these standards “no more than three years down the road,” he says. “We can’t afford to wait.”

Impact on Business Education

“Skills necessary to business sometimes get isolated in the education process,” Wise says, and explains that elements of the common core introduce levels of complexity found in the workplace, but not as much in schools. It is these elements that have business educators’ attention: the common core’s infusion of standards for literacy in information and communications technologies, its “anchor standards” for college and career readiness, and its inclusion of standards for reading and writing informational text (not just literature). Aside from their obvious parallel with business education content, they promise the possibility of breaking down silos between business and other academic disciplines. Yet for many states—and many business educators—it is too early to know how the common core will impact what happens in the classroom.

Donna Gavitt, for example, resides in Pennsylvania, which adopted the standards on July 1, 2010, and will implement them during the 2010–11 school year. Gavitt, a business educator at Selinsgrove Area High School (Selinsgrove, PA), sees a great deal of overlap between Pennsylvania’s state standards and those of the common core. Because the state standards have been cross-walked with NBEA standards, she doesn’t foresee changing too much of what she already does.

“I don’t consider the common core standards a problem. They’re clear; I like them,” she says. In her business courses, Gavitt follows and applies the cross-referenced alignment of state standards and NBEA standards. “NBEA wants to produce globally literate knowledge workers, and our business education standards are geared to that,” she adds. “But we have to make it known to administrators, superintendents, and

the [state] department of education.” (Gavitt has long been active in lobbying for the endorsement of NBEA standards by the Pennsylvania legislature.)

Business and Marketing Education Program Director Laurie Urich lives in Colorado, which at press time had not adopted the standards, but which had contracted with WestEd to perform a line-by-line gap analysis between its standards for math, reading, writing, and communicating. The goal was to recommend modifications to enhance Colorado standards and then request feedback on the analysis. It is not yet known what further action Colorado will take, but if it adopts, Urich expects the move to have a positive impact on business educators.

“It will show that we’re working with traditional academic teachers, and will make teachers more aware of their accountability,” she says. As evidence, she provides a historical example of bringing math and language arts teachers together to crosswalk Colorado’s state standards with business and marketing standards. “It was really exciting to stand back and watch the teachers work together,” Urich says. “Many said [to each other], ‘I had no idea you were doing that!’” They shared ideas on how they were presenting ideas in the classroom, and created new synergies and connections among the different disciplines. “I truly believe it has broken

down some silos,” she added.

Gavitt had a similar experience sharing her writing rubrics with an English teacher at her school. It reinforced her beliefs about the benefits business education can offer students, “not just in content but in reinforcement of core learning,” she says. “In the next 10 years I see the disciplines melding. I want to see that. There’s too much territoriality. I would like to those barriers broken down.”

Outlook: Jump In

At press time, news about the core standards seemed to appear hourly, and it’s a fair guess that this landscape will continue to change regularly.

Asked how, if at all, business educators should respond, Urich recommends the course of action she tends to take: “Review what’s happening nationally and in your home state, talk to people in your district, and network with others in professional organizations. It’s a huge support and a change system for me,” she says. “Then get involved. The way I learn is by jumping in. It’s the best way to learn and absorb things.”

The sidebar on resources is offered as a starting point for keeping up to date on national developments. Most state departments of education are also posting information about the core standards and their state’s plan of action on their websites.

NBEA is monitoring the states’ adoption of the common core standards, and they will be an agenda topic at the November 2010 Executive Board meeting in Reston. The NBEA National Standards for Business Education, which are regularly revised to reflect new developments in business education, will in their next iteration likely reference the common core state standards for English and Math. Updates will be posted on the NBEA website (www.nbea.org) as they become available.

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Resources: Common Core State Standards

- **Overview:** <http://corestandards.org>
- **The standards:** <http://corestandards.org/the-standards>
- **States that have adopted:** <http://corestandards.org/in-the-states>
- **FAQs:** <http://corestandards.org/frequently-asked-questions>
- **Summary of public feedback:** <http://corestandards.org/assets/k-12-feedback-summary.pdf>
- **Impact on testing industry:** www.edexcellence.net/doc/201006_EducationGovernance_TochTyre.pdf
- **Debate:** who will benefit? www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/7/21/who-will-benefit-from-national-education-standards
- **Comparison tool:** your state standards vs. the common core: <http://ccctool.achieve.org/gap-analysis/login/?auth;jsessionid=A957BBA7BF4762B030B7B257075AB4EE>

The Common Core Standards Initiative: A Common Solution to the Issue of College and Career Readiness

BY JOANNE M. LOZAR GLENN

Five organizations played key roles in the Common Core Standards Initiative, a state-led, yearlong effort to effect education reform through the adoption, by states, of a set of proposed national education standards in English and math. Each organization approached the effort from a different context but with a common goal: to create a common set of academic standards focused on college and career readiness. Below are brief snapshots of each organization's contribution.

Achieve: Convening the Players

The United States used to be first in the world with respect to educational attainment as measured by indicators such as high school graduation rates, college attendance, and attainment of college degrees. So how did the United States come to need an organization like Achieve, which created the American Diploma Project Network to make college and career readiness a priority in the states?

According to Mike Cohen, Achieve's president, it's not because student achievement in the United States

declined. Rather, it's because "we've stood still. Other countries have passed us by, especially in education attainment like high school graduation rates."

As concerns surfaced about competing in the global economy, concerns also surfaced about the performance of the U.S. educational system. A 1989 summit led to the establishment of national education goals and state, not national, education standards. In 1996 a follow-up summit organized by business leaders and state governors was convened to devise ways to improve the quality of state standards, and to reiterate support for standards-based educational reform. Achieve was founded at that summit conference to carry out that mission.

Through the American Diploma Project, Achieve brought together governors and K-12, higher education, and business leaders to define college- and career-ready standards, and to help each state adopt its own version of these standards. This work revealed that "state standards were converging," Cohen says. "There was literally a common core [developing]." The next step was to get states to agree that having a set of core

standards was important. The National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) provided the leadership essential to accomplishing this consensus.

"It involved a lot of listening to earn the trust of state leaders and to create an environment where they can roll up their sleeves and work together," Cohen said. "We've learned you need a combination of good technical and policy expertise and the willingness to not just recommend [ideas] but also work with them toward common solutions."

The NGA Center for Best Practices and CCSSO: Writing and Developing the Standards

In December 2009, the NGA and CCSSO released the report *Benchmarking for Success* (2008), which recommended moving educational achievement goals toward a set of internationally benchmarked standards.

"NGA and the CCSSO put together a brain trust to help us shape what that might look like," says Dane Linn, NGA's education division director. "We aligned our work to [Achieve's] National

Fast Facts: Partners in the Common Core Standards Initiative

| | Achieve | National Governors Association | Council of Chief State School Officers | Alliance for Excellent Education | Thomas B. Fordham Institute |
|------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| Founded | 1996 | 1908 | 1927 | 2001 | 1996 |
| Location | Washington, D.C. | Washington, D.C. | Washington, D.C. | Washington, D.C. | Washington, D.C. |
| Structure | Bipartisan, nonprofit education reform organization | Member association, with staff, comprising governors of the 50 states, three territories, and two commonwealths | Nonpartisan nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education | National policy and advocacy organization | Nonprofit think tank |
| Mission | Helping states raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability | Representing the collective voice of the nation's governors on national policy issues | Providing leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance in (1) educator workforce, (2) information systems and research, (3) next-generation learners, and (4) standards, assessment, and accountability | Promoting high school transformation so that every child graduates prepared for postsecondary learning and life success. | Advancing educational excellence |
| Role | Convening the states and guiding content development | With CCSSO, leading the writing effort and ensuring work was built on work that states had already done | With NGA, leading the writing effort and ensuring the views of top education leaders were represented | Continued governance | Evaluating and reviewing; tracking implementation |
| More info | www.achieve.org | www.nga.org | www.ccsso.org | www.all4ed.org | www.edexcellence.net |

Cited: NGA and CCSSO (2008). *Benchmarking for success: Ensuring U.S. students receive a world-class education*. Washington, D.C.

Diploma Project, and wanted to ensure that the standards we were developing and the process we were using would be helpful and build on the work the states had already done.”

This work was the genesis of the Common Core Standards Initiative. NGA was charged with identifying the writing team: experts on academic content who would review the best available evidence to inform the development of the standards. A feedback group was made available to the writing team, and eventually the team released a draft set of standards to the public. The resulting 10,000 comments were used to inform the final product. A national validation

committee was charged with assuring the standards adhered to the criteria NGA and CCSSO had developed, and “that group certified the standards for us,” Linn says.

Use of “best evidence” was a key distinction between this and other standards-writing efforts, Linn believes. “Many others rely on consensus to determine what ends up in the final document,” he says. “When that happens, you never make a decision about what gets included; you get everything. Our key criteria were standards that were fewer, clearer, and higher [than any others that had existed previously].”

Linn and others are pleased with

the effort, noting that “the process was inclusive, grounded in the best possible research, and involved sites and teachers in the process, which [gave us] credibility.”

What’s ahead? “Helping states recognize and evaluate their current policies,” Linn says, “and identify how resources are aligned to policies for successful implementation.”

The Alliance for Excellent Education: Providing Continued Support

With states on board and resources beginning to be allocated, an important next step is determining a governance process that ensures states will continue developing, upgrading, and controlling

the common core standards, explains Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. And so the question becomes: *What kind of governance?* “How do we identify the best practices for moving toward implementation of the common core standards,” he asks, “and [how do we] ensure that standards are constantly being kept up to date with what students need to know?”

Whatever the answer, there is one sure thing: the states will no longer have to do this work independently and therefore not as expensively as in the past. “States spend \$1.3 billion dollars on assessments, for example,” Wise says. “Common assessments will have a cost savings.”

The other benefit, aside from helping eradicate educational disparities among states, is the lack of direct Federal involvement in the process—and therefore no Federal mandate or penalty, which makes getting on board much more appealing. “It has been a state-led, local-led effort,” Wise says. “That is its strength: the states coming together and offering the best of what each has to offer.”

Instead of mandates or penalties, there have been Federal incentives for

adoption, such as grants from the Department of Education’s Race to the Top program. These grants are intended to fund state school-reform efforts and have spurred some states to “get on board” earlier than they might have otherwise.

The Common Core Standards Initiative “is one of the most significant movements in education to come along in a long time,” he says, “and I’m encouraged that it is being run by states.”

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute: Evaluating, Reviewing, Advocating

As evaluator and reviewer, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute was responsible for overseeing an analysis of the common standards and producing a report comparing each state’s standards with the common set.

“[Our organization] has a strong idea about what good standards look like,” says Michael Petrilli, vice-president of the Institute’s National Programs and Policy Department. “We wanted them to be as rigorous and clear as possible, to get the content right.”

It was a challenging process. The evaluators, who were outside experts, had to determine what exactly to review:

some states have standards, others have curriculum frameworks, and still others have testing frameworks.

Even on a short timeline, though, the work was completed and a report was released on July 21, 2010. The verdict? “The common core standards are better than English standards in 37 states, and math standards in 39 states—and for other states, it’s too close to call,” said the headlines, widely distributed to print, audio, and online news media outlets.

Though the institute’s main function is as a think tank, Petrilli says that his organization will work with the others to track implementation and discuss further governance issues, such as who will “own” the standards and who will update them. “So far it’s been a good story but an ad hoc process,” he says. “The next question will be ‘Is there a way to make clear who’s in charge?’”

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