



Now What? Imperatives & Options for “Common Core” Implementation & Governance October 2010

With the release of the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math, as well as the current assessment-development efforts tied to those standards, much of the U.S. is on the way toward shared academic expectations and measures for K-12 education—a remarkable development. Yet a thousand “next steps” must be thought through and implemented if these standards and assessments are to get real traction and yield real benefits for American kids, schools and educators in the years ahead.

Will help from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have been considering those steps along with a set of thorny issues that will determine the *long-term* viability of this endeavor. What needs to happen in the next five years? A decade hence, who will be in charge of the common standards-and-testing effort? How will these activities be governed? Paid for? And more.

Below you will find **David P. Driscoll**’s responses (in red) to a dozen perplexing questions on the future of the Common Core initiative. The questions are split into two sections, the first focusing on standards and the second on assessments. Responses from additional education experts, along with Fordham’s own October 2010 synthesis and recommendations (by Chester Finn and Mike Petrilli), *Now What? Imperatives & Options for “Common Core” Implementation & Governance*, can be found online at http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_now-what-imperatives-and-options-for-common-core-implementation-and-governance.

(Questionnaires and responses are from June 2010. Some references may be out-dated.)

David P. Driscoll

Former Commissioner of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Current Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board

Governance of the Common Core State Standards

- 1) Who should oversee the ongoing development and revision of the Common Core State Standards over, say, the next twenty years?
 - Does something new need to be created or can existing organizations or structures handle it?

- What's the argument for/against turning this whole thing over to NAGB to run (in addition to NAEP)?
- What about letting the ad hoc coalition that got us this far (led by NGA and CCSSO) continue to lead the process?
- How urgent is this? Could the "Common Core" initiative proceed for a time with *no* governance per se, then reconvene the original partners to take stock and determine next steps?

The Governance of the Standards going forward should be determined by CCSSO and NGA. The basic model being employed here is that the Federal Government and/or Foundations are putting up the money to fund important initiatives (i.e. Race to the Top, Common Standards) that will fundamentally change the way public schools function and student achievement is measured. They (the Feds and let's say Gates) are placing a bet that given some money upfront, certain entities will be able to establish the right course. In the case of RTTT, that bet is on Public Institutions – namely States. In the case of the standards, it is this combination of CCSSO and NGA. Once the US Department of Education has essentially handed off this crucial responsibility and let it be handled by these Organizations on behalf of States (note some States chose not to play), it is owned by these two Organizations. In the case of the Assessments it will be a combination of Consortia. I believe the fundamental factor in all of this is that USDOE deliberately set out to achieve their long term objectives by letting others implement and engineering the process through the rules of funding. Therefore, while the various entities are free to manage the way they want to manage, they are owing to USDOE for the initial funds. It could be that in the future USDOE finds the Standards and/or assessments not to measure up, but short of terminating any funding that may still exist, and rejecting the products as inferior, they are powerless to stop their use because they have been party to the process that created them in the first place.

NAGB should "stick to its' knitting" and can therefore continue to be the independent verifier of the assessments. It is important that the Governance be decided now.

- 2) If it's a new governing body, how should it be constituted? What should be its governance? Members? Selected by whom? Should it include (for example) governors? State chiefs? Legislators? Superintendents of major districts? Teachers? Subject matter experts? Who else?
 - Since most people believe it's important to maintain state ownership/leadership of the CCSSI venture going forward, what are the best ways of ensuring this?
 - Does it need to be a formal entity or could it be a looser confederation or network?

CCSSO and NGA should determine the Governance structure themselves without interference from anyone including USDOE. They have earned that right by taking on the responsibility and inherent in their effort was the notion that these would not be "National/Federal Standards" but "owned by the states". Since their success so far has been largely due to the very competent people they assembled to lead the writing effort, it would seem logical that these two organizations could figure out the best way to structure an oversight group or Board that should consist of a combination of content experts and representatives of States. Something like a nine (9) member Board with the Chair chosen jointly by CCSSO and NGA, three members appointed by each Organization and two experts from each field of English/Language Arts and Mathematics again chosen jointly. I have faith that such a Board will operate effectively with regularly scheduled open meetings and various ways to communicate with, and reach out to, the "field" and the general public.

- 3) How, if at all, should *higher education* be involved in the governance of K-12 standards (and assessments)? How about *employers*? Particularly considering that meeting these standards and passing these assessments should signify “college and career readiness”?

The charge of the Board would be to make the standards as strong as they can be. They also need to pay attention to those States that are getting the best results because in theory (unlike NAEP which does not easily provide the link to classroom practice) these standards and the products built around them, should inform educators right down to the classroom level. This will involve periodic revisions every few years, research projects and other initiatives to test their strength and their usage. Over time, the Assessment will inform the relative rigor of the standards and there will undoubtedly be States that perform and improve at various levels calling for greater scrutiny. The issues of the involvement of specific groups (Superintendents, Higher education, employers etc.) should be a function of the way the board functions. Any effective Board has ways of gaining input from various groups, pays attention to trends and new developments and has clear goals of performance for themselves and, in this case, the products they oversee. Should it turn out that Test results are pretty similar to NAEP overall and some States stand out, it should translate into valuable information about the better ways to implement the standards. The Board needs to have monies for research which should come from the states themselves and augmented by the Federal Government, Foundations and others.

- 4) How can the governing body be constituted to increase the likelihood that it will maintain rigor in the face of political push-back? In other words, how to protect the common standards from getting dumbed-down over time? Is there a role here for something like the “validation committee” that participated in the initial CCSSI process?

The Common Core standards process thus far has proven that these two groups are very serious about establishing very rigorous standards. There is nothing to be gained by looking to lower standards. NGA and CCSSO were on record as being opposed to State standards that were “dumbed down” and the clear expectation of both groups is that our students be held to standards that are comparable to those in the highest performing countries of the world. The experience of the establishment of State standards and Assessments under NCLB was a sad chapter in our history where self interest (maybe self preservation) won out over setting the right goals for students. It was particularly criminal when it became very apparent through comparisons with NAEP (as called for in NCLB) which States needed to revise their standards.

- 5) What roles, if any, should the governing body of the CCSSI initiative play beyond overseeing the ongoing development and revision of the standards? Should it undertake research to determine their validity? Their effectiveness? The fidelity of state and local implementation? How participating states handle the “additional 15 %”? Should it undertake any implementation activities itself? Developing curriculum, for example? Monitoring curricular alignment with the standards? Designing instructional materials? Developing professional development modules? Others? If the CCSSI governing body doesn’t oversee these activities, who should (particularly if any of this is to be done in a “common” way)?

The Board will need to establish and scrutinize ways that the standards can be measured so as to maintain rigor. The Board also needs to establish and scrutinize ways that the standards are being implemented in various states/districts/schools/classrooms so as try to maximize effective practices. As

this should be the focus of the work of SDEs, Districts, Schools and others, the role of the Board will be less direct but nonetheless critical.

The Board's role in Instructional materials, curricula and the like should be to publish results and conduct some research that might reveal better performance in some places but let the marketplace flourish (or not). Whatever evidence the board can bring to bear will be helpful. In states where performance is high or the improvement of performance is striking, you can anticipate every vendor being used in that State will declare victory. It is only up to the board to disseminate the best information possible.

Just as USDOE handed off the setting of the standards, so too they handed off 15% leeway to the States. Therefore, the States need to figure out how they are going to manage that part of the process. Since I have been impressed with the standards as established, I believe the 15% will eventually disappear. Making states manage and pay for it all – development, corresponding assessments will hasten the disappearance.

- 6) How should this be paid for going forward? If not by the federal government, then by whom? If by states, how would that work? If by the federal government, what should be the relationship of the government to the common standards' governing body?

The cost going forward should be borne by the states. The governing body should establish a budget for their expenses including the more mundane costs of conducting meetings to the more expensive aspects of revisions and research. Once the budget is established, states should be assessed by means of a formula that CCSSO and NGA could set along the typical lines of minimums and maximums and costs per student population.

- 7) What other comments or suggestions do you have that might be considered for the long-term governance of the common standards?

I will end where I began. Like it or not CCSSO and NGA have stepped forward and, to this point, have done a most credible job in setting the standards. This trick play where USDOE handed off the task so that it is not owned but only paid for by the Feds becomes the operating principles to me going forward. However they got there, CCSSO and NGA have established the Common Core State Standards. They own them and should govern them. Those two organizations may not have been careful in what they wished for but now the responsibilities going forward belong to them. They must manage the products including periodic revisions etc. Inherent in all of this was a two part plan. Entities (that would be CCSSO and NGA) would oversee the development of standards and Consortia of states would contract for the accompanying assessment program tied to those standards. The Feds will fund the upfront costs but there are no guarantees on the level of federal monies going forward. In fact, given the current finance picture, and the large initial appropriation by the Feds (also true of RTTT) the betting would have to be that funding from the Federal government will be modest at best. A likely factor taken into consideration is that the current cost of scores of state assessments will be drastically reduced when it is confined to a few Consortia. Therefore, the expectation of majority funding by states for assessments going forward is predictable.

Governance of the Common Core State Assessments

- 8) What are the governance implications of finding ourselves with more than one set of assessments aligned to the common standards? Will each successful “consortium” simply govern itself over the long haul? What should those governing bodies look like? How, if at all, should they relate to the governing body of the Common Core *standards*?

The Board overseeing the (CCSSI) will need a trick play of its’ own. The Common Standards are to be implemented by vendors chosen by consortia of States. USDOE set the rules (there could not be ten different consortia for example) but the assessment developers must connect to the standards which were set under the direction of two independent organizations. USDOE even specifies that a certain subset of states in the consortia will govern the contract. This odd arrangement of players can work – in fact Arnie Duncan is counting on it. If you are a pessimist you could easily point to places where various actors could trip each other up. What if one vendor hoodwinks their set of states into an assessment that is not carefully aligned to the standards and test questions are mushy? For optimists like me, this odd end around play could actually work. There are these push-pull, tight-loose, aspects that could combine to keep things on track. The very public way the standards were rolled out and the careful way feedback was included to improve the standards bodes well for a similar successful assessment component. The pressure is on the vendors to produce assessments such that results will measure favorably when compared to NAEP.

The governance of this part seems clear. The states will manage their own consortia and be expected to see student achievement truly measured against the standards and cut scores and performance levels accurately reporting on where individual students stand with respect to being college and career ready. Logically, one would expect an oversight committee established by participating states for each consortium with representatives including some state test directors or staff. They would have no direct connection to the governing board of CCSSI. However, everyone’s work will be to carefully examine test results to figure out who is getting results and why.

- 9) What roles should the assessment consortia play, beyond developing and updating the test specifications? Administering the tests over the long run? Ensuring test security? Setting guidelines for participation of special education students and English language learners? Setting “cut scores”? Publishing school-by-school results? Rating schools based on the results? Others? If the assessment consortia don’t oversee these activities, who should (particularly if any of this is to be done in a “common” way)?

Just as a single state governs the vendor (or should), so too the collection of states in the consortia must do the same. The states determine the policies around the testing policies relating to special education students, the use of calculators, establish cut scores, performance levels, review test items, release of results. Pat Devito’s description of what a State does can be translated to what the group of states should do. Complications arise when the vendor starts to assume policy responsibilities that should be determined by the state(s).

- 10) If it turns out that only one assessment consortium wins the “Race to the Test” competition—or that states eventually opt for a single new assessment system—should its governing body be merged with that of the common standards? Why or why not?

The eventual emergence of one assessment consortia is a real possibility. Given that there are two at this point, the scenarios are few. The test results are comparable and each continues or one is far

superior to the other and survives alone. Obviously, both could perform poorly and the one that lags could promise to dramatically improve its performance but I think it is even likely that one emerges. If that happens, I do not see it having any impact on governance. The common standards with a board will continue and independently, the one consortium will develop the assessment. There should not be the accusation that we have a National Test anymore than there is the claim now that we have National standards. To some the difference will be clear to others subtle at best. The two “boards” – one overseeing the standards and the other, overseeing the assessment will be separate. Their only connection will be a common set of standards to which the assessment will be linked and a common passion to get as many kids to the high standards of college and career ready.

- 11) How should the assessments be paid for going forward? If not by the federal government, then by whom? If by states, how would that work? If by the federal government, what should be its relationship to the assessment consortia?

I would like to see the assessments funded on a formula of one-third by the Federal Government and two-thirds by the States. The relationship between the federal Government and the assessment consortia(s) should be no different than the current relationship with the Feds and State testing programs under NCLB. The difference is that NCLB left it to states to set the standards, whereas in this plan the Feds are engineering a process to try and guarantee high standards and correspondingly strong assessments.

The initial savings for states collectively should be quite large particularly given the initial investment of USDOE. Hopefully, this will allow for the various parties to communicate (USDOE, CCSSI Board, State Consortia Oversight Committee(s)) and articulate a research agenda that will advance the alignment of effective classroom practice to student results. My candidate for leading such research would be IES.

- 12) What other comments or suggestions do you have that might be considered for the governance of the common assessments?