



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.

With 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 **Mark Schneider**’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.)

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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?

I believe in the continued centrality of the states in any transition from the broken system we have now. We have a few models—McGuinn’s paper was good on this, and like you, I found the idea of formal interstate compacts interesting.

But we also have regional models that are not as formal as these interstate compacts, e.g., NECAP, SREB, in higher education WICHE, etc. There’s lots of political science literature about the diffusion of innovation that shows both the importance of national leaders but also show how important regional patterns are. It would also be easier in the medium run to worry about how to coordinate and build upon say 4-6 regional consortia than trying to monitor the behavior of 51 state systems.

An interim regional solution (I use the word interim w/o a firm conviction of how long “interim” implies) would be far more politically palatable than a national one. We could couple this regional approach with the idea of “partial preemption”, setting the floor levels under which consortia standards could not fall.

I am not in favor of turning this over to NAGB and the regional solution would put the need for a *national* governing body off for some time.

Maybe I am being a coward by not insisting on a national solution now, but regionalism and state responsibilities are deeply held values in U.S. education (never mind the constitution) and should be respected. A big question is how to rely on and mobilize states while at the same time NOT setting up perverse incentives such as the proficiency requirements of NCLB.

- 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?

As noted, I don’t think we need a national governing body—but the question becomes one of setting minimum standards. We would need studies of how such standards were set in environmental policy areas (where partial preemption is a norm) or in special education.

- 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”?

These are hard questions. Let’s start with the question of employers: which sector are you talking about? What size firms? Rather than thinking about employers, would it be possible to use ONET and labor economists to help us get a handle on the skill sets that will be needed 5 years, 10 years out? Could that help us figure out what career readiness means?

ONET is well regarded, but how reliable are the forecasts contained therein? Could we build standards and assessments quickly enough that reflect the “predictions” that are contained in ONET?

If we are using the regional model I talked about above, would the competition between consortia be good or bad? Would regions rush to argue that they are the ones that are best in identifying needed skills of the future and how would that affect the quality of the regional standards and assessments?

- 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?

Nice thing about arguing for a regional approach is that I can skip these kinds of questions. That said, a validation committee or committees is appealing, but would the committee(s) have any statutory authority? Or would they just have the bully pulpit to cast shame on any regional/state movement away from rigor. In other words, would (could) such committees issue the kinds of reports NCES and Fordham did about the standards illusion and would that have any effect? Would these reports have more impact than the ones we did. If there is partial preemption with a floor set by statute, perhaps this could be avoided—or some enforcement mechanism be built into the partial preemption.

- 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)?

These are huge jobs and I don’t see how the CCSSI could do this within its existing resources and expertise. These tasks would require contracts with the large consulting firms—the only organizations with the capacity to do this work—and would be very expensive. CCSSI also doesn’t have the capacity to manage the RFA grant/contract process that would underlie the evaluation implied above. I think much of the first half of the work implied in all the questions enumerated in point 5 could likely be handled through IES.

I stay away from PD—although again once we undertake any form of PD, there are models for assessing its effect.

- 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?

This ultimately is going to have to be paid for by the states. I believe that we would have to look to the models of state compacts to explore further their funding models. Probably the federal government will have to subsidize the creation of these regional bodies (although many already exist but some capital may be required to get them to add more responsibilities).

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

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*?

I think this reduces to a question about ensuring that the quality of the tests are similar and that they are truly rigorous and valid assessments. Not sure if governance matters beyond the quality of the tests produced.

- 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)?

These, like all the others, are tough. Test security with high stakes tests has, as you know, a long and often seedy history. I like many others believe that tests ultimately need to be adaptive and done online—this might ameliorate some of the test security problems that have plagued tests in the past—although I guess teachers can have “ringers” take the test.

Cut-scores are another issue. I fully understand and appreciate the importance of cut-scores in terms of interpreting scores and getting attention. Saying students scored 230 (or whatever) on NAEP and that was 2 points higher than last time doesn’t have the same attention getting power as saying 5% of students were advanced. But as you know setting cut scores is like making sausage—and the soon to be released NAEP science report will give yet additional evidence to the perils of the process.

My counter example to cut-scores is SAT and ACT scores—which have become their own metrics with no need for cut scores. How that could work in the long run with a new national test(s), especially if there are different regional consortia is not at all clear—but it would no doubt require the formalization of the NCES mapping studies to validate that the numbers reported are “real”.

- 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?
- 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?

As above, I think that in funding should continue to be a state responsibility. There is the golden rule of public administration “he who has the gold rules.” If all of this is paid for from federal monies, then all of this becomes a federal controlled process.

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

I think more attention needs to be paid to the issue of the effects of this process on the testing industry. The last paper you commissioned just touched the surface of the capacity of the industry to respond and touched on the rather intense battles that will emerge.