



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 **Michael D. Usdan’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?

The issue of governance ought to be addressed in stages. For the immediate future, CCSSI remains a fragile entity despite the admirable political skills with which it has been handled by NGA and CCSSO. I am fearful that this worthy and necessary effort may well be swept up in an anti-federal government backlash that not only will bitterly oppose the recent centralization of power in education but concurrently the concentration of federal power in other important policy realms like health care, finance, private corporate operations, the environment, energy, regulation, taxation, etc. In essence, the November elections may well see a very strong anti-Washington backlash that potentially could cripple the fledgling and vitally important efforts to create stronger national or common standards and assessments. The Administration’s exploratory and untimely efforts to prematurely link the CCSSI with ESEA reauthorization already have created apprehensions throughout the education policy universe. Unfortunately, such federal efforts might be the “kiss of death” for the still tenuous CCSSI as more generic opposition to the expansion of “big” government across policy realms continues to escalate.

It would be politically foolhardy at this particularly sensitive time to promote any new governance mechanism for CCSSI. NGA and CCSSO thus far have demonstrated both political and substantive smarts in handling the Initiative and should continue to do so until the “dust settles” a bit. The environment is replete with volatile and major initiatives that will play out in the next few months. Federal programs like Race to the Top (RTT) and the Department’s grant competition for new assessment systems may well reshape the educational landscape dramatically with unpredictable consequences.

Although revenue starved states have been “bribed” or in many cases acquiesced reluctantly to the lure of badly needed federal dollars in the RTT and other competitions, I would not discount the resiliency of the local and state control culture within influential educational and public policy circles. There is deep-seeded resentment toward the Administration among many of its traditional allies within the mass membership education groups which have such great political leverage at the local and state levels. There is, in other words, widespread disaffection with the Obama Administration. If the aforementioned overall political backlash against Washington eventuates in the November elections, there will be a diminution of federal power. K-12 school groups in all likelihood will not support Democrats as they did with such fervor in the 2008 Presidential elections. Indeed, K-12 school groups could find themselves aligned with anti-Washington, anti-tax entities that are not their traditional or natural political bedfellows.

My concluding point simply is that for the short run there is too much unpredictability in the contemporary policy environment to tinker with developing a governance structure with CCSSI at this time. For the immediate future, let NGA and CCSSO continue their good work and lead the CCSSI process and let complicated long range governance issues remain in abeyance.

Mark Musick in his paper lays out very convincingly the arguments against turning CCSSI over to NAGB as the latter is currently constituted. His point about the differences in mission between NAEP/NAGB and CCSSI is particularly important not only substantively but also politically in the contemporary environment described earlier.

CCSSI if it is to thrive and perhaps survive must maintain (at least for the short run) its state centered genesis and mission. Musick's point about the need to maintain and not dilute or confound NAEP's unique mission and function as the "only credible outside auditor of educational achievement" is vitally important.

- 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?

Ultimately, of course, there will be the need to create an independent body to govern CCSSI. If state ownership/leadership is to be maintained, it will be important to include representatives from major state policy shapers like governors, legislators and state board members as well as from the general public and a wide swath of education interest groups like teachers and administrators.

Although this Governing Board would be state oriented, federal representation and/or relationships would also be required since federal resources would be essential if the entity is to be sustained. The challenge, as Musick cites in his paper, was (and remains) how "to create a quasi-governmental body that has true independence and, at the same time, has enough clout to get good appropriations." (p.4)

The Board, if it is to have the influence it merits, ultimately must evolve into a formal entity with explicit governance authority unlike the ambiguous status of NAGB which has been constrained to some degree in its operations and staffing by federal bureaucratic limitations and mandated statutory reporting relationships to NCES and the Department of Education.

The Board, as it is ultimately constituted, to some degree will have to resemble "Noah's Ark" (to use Musick's metaphor) for appropriate political involvement of education and related groups. There should be ample representation, however, of prestigious private and civic sector leaders so that the broader public has the powerful voice of individuals who do not represent special interests. This would be essential if a "trusteeship culture" is to be established.

- 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"?

Both higher education and employers should be involved in the governance of K-12 standards and assessments. There should be representation of these groups on the Governing Board as well as advisory committees that relate to it on a regular basis.

Particular emphasis should be placed on ensuring close working relationships with burgeoning community colleges which among the components of higher education play a unique brokering role with employers. These two year institutions will be playing increasingly significant academic and career readiness roles as the nation continues to experience profound demographic and employment changes and challenges.

- 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 dangers of political push-back are real and perhaps inevitable if rigorous standards are set and sustained. One strategy is to create a mechanism like the “validation committee” which was involved in the CCSSI process. This certainly makes sense as a means to politically buttress the governing body from the inevitable push-back.

Another important political approach would be to more explicitly involve state legislators in the standards/assessment movement. There is a widespread feeling within legislative circles that they have been ignored or neglected in the CCSSI and other standards/assessments development processes.

Gubernatorial leadership and dominance in these issues has exacerbated endemic executive/legislative branch tensions in many states. In many, if not most, jurisdictions there is greater leadership churn among governors than legislators. This reality should be kept in mind as efforts to protect and sustain CCSSI and related activities evolve.

Indeed, within the next year, this leadership churn will be particularly startling with turnover of approximately two-thirds of the governors and half of the chief state school officers.

- 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)?

Ideally, the diverse roles and responsibilities envisioned in this question would be appropriate for the governing body to undertake. As discussed earlier, however, I would be fearful that premature discussions about an enlarged (albeit logical) set of responsibilities for the governing body of the CCSSI would be dysfunctional for at least the immediate future. Ultimately, the governing body should oversee all of these activities. As mentioned earlier, the timing (at least in the immediate future) is simply not appropriate. The current political and financial uncertainties are such that a discussion of such an expansionary agenda with the implicit fear of a federal takeover might jeopardize and even destroy CCSSI’s future. The timing is simply not right to explicitly codify and expand such activities. This current reality, however, should not preclude planning for such an expansion of functions sometime in the future when the timing for a detailed discussion of governance would be more propitious.

- 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?

Again, if one assumes that federal resources will be a sine qua non if CCSSI is to succeed and be sustained, close relationships will have to be established between the federal government and the CCSSI governing body. The details of this relationship will be of vital importance as discussed in my response to an earlier question.

A logical and politically viable funding scheme might be predicated on shared contributions by federal, state and private (foundation) sources. Logically, only the federal government will have ample sustainable resources which makes the need to synchronize governance relationships between the U.S. Education Department and CCSSI even more important. For example, one cannot depend on substantial or even minimal state resources. The states historically have been derelict in supporting research, planning and evaluation activities with well over 85% of state education agency personnel still being supported by federal funds. In fact, state education agencies are widely viewed as wholly owned federal subsidiaries. There is very little likelihood of this changing in the foreseeable future. The concept of creating a “research endowment” as alluded to in the Manna paper is worthy of exploring as planning evolves.

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

Financial planning for CCSSI will have to be predicated on the scope of its mission which understandably remains undefined at this early stage of its development. The interstate compact approach as explicated in the McGuinn paper has considerable potential as a governance strategy.

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 development and political acceptance of appropriate assessments are key issues confronting advocates of common or national standards and assessments. The creation and deservedly widely applauded work on standards by the CCSSI is a noteworthy achievement and merits plaudits. This work, however, is relatively easy compared to the political and substantive challenges inherent in the assessment development issue confronted by the Education Department and other involved parties.

The implications of the forthcoming federal funding and its relationships to existing state and consortial assessment arrangements are well explicated in the DeVito context paper. Indeed, the pluses and minuses of the “federal footprint” might be most profound when the U.S. Department of Education makes its decision within the immediate future about funding multi-state consortia. Indeed, most states, according to DeVito, understandably are in a holding pattern awaiting the federal decision which will have such a profound impact on existing assessment programs as well as subsequent planning for a governance structure for overall assessment activities.

This fluid situation is quite analogous to the earlier standards discussion. The current context is simply too unpredictable for anyone to be particularly comfortable about projecting an appropriate assessment

governing structure. It is an issue that might be more effectively addressed after the federal officials announce the winners of their grant competition for developing new assessment systems. The reactions to this announcement as well as to the RTT and common core activities will have an enormous impact and profound implications, for example, on the plans of consortia like NECAP and a jurisdiction like Massachusetts with its nationally recognized state assessment program.

One would hope, of course, that whatever shape this assessment development consortium takes that its work would be closely related and preferably integrated with the work of the governing body of the CCSS when and if the latter becomes operational.

- 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)?

My answer would be similar to the one given to question 5 under the standards section. Ideally, the leaders of the assessment consortium (a) should ultimately and logically assume most if not all of these roles. Again, the political sensitivities within the federal system and the fear of a federal takeover plus the tension with existing assessment structures will require very deliberate and staged approaches. The complexity of integrating assessment strategies on a multi-state basis is well documented in the DeVito paper.

- 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?

Ultimately, the goal sometime in the future would be to develop a national (not federal) governance body with impeccable prestige and technical capacity to govern and integrate both the standards and assessments enterprises under one roof. I hope some of us septuagenarians are alive to see it!

- 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?

The major financing of the assessments will have to be assumed by the federal government. It is already in process and will be buttressed by the forthcoming new federal assessment grant(s).

The likelihood of new substantial federal funding, however, could be seriously compromised not only by growing concerns about the burgeoning deficit but by the aforementioned political apprehensions about the concentration of governmental power in Washington, D.C.

One cannot be optimistic, particularly in these constrained fiscal times, that the states will do much financially. The states, as discussed in my response to question 6, historically have been parsimonious in support of assessment and related research and/or state education department activities.

As Toch and Tyre comment in their paper, the states collectively have made minimal investments (less than ½ of 1%) of the combined spending on testing despite the latter's recent escalating saliency as a policy issue.

Indeed, the lack of substantive state capacity reinforces fiscal and technical dependence on test publishers and outside consulting firms and feeds further skepticism about sustaining support for improvements in testing once the federal investment in development has ceased.

Indeed, the financial issue could well be the Achilles heel of current efforts in both the standards and assessments realms. Musick's caveat about the limitations of partnerships in funding between public and private sources is important to note. The federal government may be the only meaningful long-range funder of these efforts and the political challenges of handling this transcendent responsibility are great. The need for finesse, cultural sensitivity to the historical norms of local and state influence in education, and nuanced approaches in a politically volatile, ever-changing intergovernmental policy system may pose challenges to the Obama Administration and other advocates of national or common standards and assessments that are even greater than the fiscal crisis confronting the educational enterprise as another "new federalism" quite possibly evolves in the immediate future.

In my estimation – (at least within the immediate future) - there will be increasingly influential demands to once again recalibrate the federal system by redressing crucial imbalances between recently strengthened federal authority and weakened states and localities.

Proponents of the standards/assessment movement will have to maneuver deftly to sustain their current momentum if they are to avoid being swept away by powerful unpredictable centrifugal political forces currently racing within the public and educational policy arenas.

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