

# Academic Standards and Assessments

**Issue #1:** *Should states be required to adopt academic standards tied to college and career readiness (such as the Common Core)?*

## Current Law

Title I of ESEA (Section 1111(b)(1)) requires each state to demonstrate that it has adopted challenging academic-content standards that apply to all schools and students, at least in reading/English language arts and math (and, beginning in 2005–06, in science), and has met certain other criteria.

## Background

In recent years, policymakers, analysts, and others have grown concerned that most states' academic standards for K–12 education are not aligned with the demands of college or the workplace. To address this problem—and to bring greater consistency to expectations across state lines—the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices came together to create the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). To date, forty-four states plus the District of Columbia have voluntarily adopted these standards, which were found by the Fordham Institute to be as rigorous as or more rigorous than those that had been in place in almost all of the states.<sup>2</sup>

For ESEA reauthorization, one of the key questions is what role these Common Core standards should play, if any, in eligibility for federal funds. Should Congress mandate that every state participate in the CCSSI? If not, should states be required to adopt other rigorous standards that ensure that students are ready for college or the workforce upon graduation?

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Byrd Carmichael, Gabrielle Martino, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and W. Steven Wilson, *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010), <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/the-state-of-state.html>.

## Options

**Option 1A:** Require states to adopt the Common Core standards in reading and math as a condition of receiving federal Title I funds.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensures that states have consistent and rigorous standards</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Federalizes what has been a state-developed initiative, effectively adopting these standards as national standards</li><li>• Could lead to a backlash against the entire CCSSI</li></ul>

**Option 1B:** As a condition of receiving federal Title I funds, require either that states adopt consortium-developed reading and/or math standards, OR that they develop their own standards in conjunction with their four-year public university systems, which will have to certify that mastery of the standards guarantees students' ability to perform college-level coursework upon admission. (Administration's proposal)

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gives states the option of how to upgrade standards and does not federalize the Common Core</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Potentially requires states wishing to receive federal dollars to expend significant effort upgrading standards if they choose not to participate in the Common Core</li><li>• Could easily be gamed by non-Common Core states if their university systems are willing to certify questionable standards</li></ul>

**Option 1C:** As a condition of receiving federal Title I funds, require states to adopt the Common Core standards in reading and math, OR to demonstrate that their existing standards are just as rigorous as the Common Core. Standards developed apart from the Common Core initiative would be peer reviewed at the federal level by a panel of state officials and content-matter experts; the panel itself (not the secretary of education) would have the authority to determine whether a state’s standards are rigorous enough.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows states to choose how to upgrade standards and does not federalize the Common Core</li> <li>• Via external peer review, can help to ensure that standards are as rigorous as the Common Core; it is less likely to be gamed than an intrastate solution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially requires states wishing to receive federal dollars to expend significant effort upgrading standards if they choose not to participate in the Common Core</li> <li>• Could be technically difficult to determine whether standards are “just as rigorous” as the Common Core</li> </ul>

## The Reform Realism Position: Option 1C

Our “tight-loose” formulation of federal policy holds that policymakers should be “tight” about what students are expected to know and be able to do. While mandating the Common Core is tempting, it would lead to significant political backlash—and for good reason, since it would represent an unwarranted intrusion by the federal government into state matters. Still, states that want no part of the Common Core, but do want Title I dollars, should be required to make their case, to an external body, that they have equally rigorous standards in place.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is important that the peer review process not be controlled by federal officials. Various ways of structuring it can mitigate this risk. For example, the state having its standards (or tests, cut scores, etc.) reviewed might nominate two members of a seven-member panel; the secretary of education might nominate two members from other states; and the four initial nominees must agree on the three remaining members. Any recommendation emanating from such a panel must have at least five of the seven members voting in favor.