

## Introduction

As of March 2012, forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).<sup>1</sup> While states should be lauded for strengthening their expectations for students,<sup>2</sup> nobody should expect standards adoption *alone* to drive student growth. Indeed, a sensible “theory of action” should undergird the CCSS and articulate how the standards can better gain traction in states.

That (admittedly simple) theory goes something like this: The state adopts strong standards, administers outcome assessments that reflect the standards’ rigor and intent, and puts into place a robust accountability system that supports, rewards, and sanctions, as needed, schools, students, teachers, and other adults. Districts handle curriculum, instructional materials, and professional development; administer diagnostic measures; and provide other resources to help teachers implement the standards with fidelity in classrooms. But the *state*—it bears repeating—is uniquely positioned to send the message to educators, parents, and the broader public that a quality education is valued within its borders and that it will advance judicious policies to help ensure that schools, students, and adults are held to account for student success. After all, strong standards nested within a flimsy state accountability structure will surely wither.

Thus the time for states to reboot their accountability systems is now. They are poised to take advantage not only of the opportunity that CCSS affords but also of that presented by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers. Three-quarters of the states have now applied for federal waivers; eleven were approved by the Obama administration in February 2012, and twenty-six states (plus the District of Columbia) are pending consideration as of early April

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota adopted the CCSS for English language arts only, and thus is not counted in this tally.

<sup>2</sup> For the majority of states, the CCSS marks a vast improvement over their previous mediocre-to-awful academic standards in English language arts and mathematics. See Sheila Byrd Carmichael, Gabrielle Martino, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and W. Stephen Wilson, *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 2010), <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/the-state-of-state.html>.

(the third waiver deadline is September 2012).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the draft reauthorization bills that are making their way through Congress would likely give states even wider latitude to design their own approaches to accountability.

Worn down by a federal law that attempts to dictate uniform accountability for all jurisdictions, states have now come forward with their own ideas of how to fix a broken K-12 system. Some states will seize the opportunity to advance student performance more aggressively than ever before; others, almost inevitably, will shirk their commitments—perhaps because they think accountability is wrong-headed, mean-spirited, or unnerving—and take the easy road. The latter is understandable; after all, people and organizations don't much like accountability—at least not for themselves. Active resistance and foot-dragging are to be expected, much more so than in response to standards and assessments alone. All the more important, then, to help accountability agents to stay honest and their systems to become—or remain—forward-thinking, pragmatic, and relentless in their pursuit of better outcomes for students. That's the goal of this paper.

But what should strong state accountability systems—those that help ensure that the common standards get taught (and learned!) in classrooms—look like in 2012-13 and beyond?

Once upon a time, we talked about standards as one leg of a three-legged stool: They must be accompanied by strong assessments that accurately measure student performance *and* by strong accountability systems that tie school- and district-level consequences to that performance. While those building-block elements still have merit today, they also need a fresh remodeling. Version 2.0 of state education-reform systems must broaden accountability requirements to include students and individual adults—not just the buildings and districts that they occupy. These new systems will also need to be nimble enough to embrace advances in how we measure student progress, teacher and principal effectiveness, and education productivity.

Though we don't yet know what this will look like, the CCSS will soon stand on its second leg: Two federally funded consortia of states are currently crafting new systems of annual assessments aligned to the common standards. (We hope that these tests will reflect the rigor and intent of the standards to which they are to be aligned.) Even with the standards and assessments legs of the stool in place,

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<sup>3</sup> In September 2011, the U.S. Department of Education established a waiver application process by which states can bypass some of the more onerous and objectionable aspects of NCLB. In exchange, states had to agree to implement a number of reforms relative to college- and career-ready standards, aligned assessments, differentiated accountability systems, and teacher and principal evaluation systems, among other areas. See *ESEA Waivers Alter State Accountability Systems* on page 16 for more.

however, the effectiveness of the CCSS in each state will depend greatly on the strength of each state’s accountability system.

Leaning on our own research and that of others, this report lays out the major principles of a strong state accountability system and our rationale for their inclusion. We follow that with a short discussion of common accountability pitfalls and an in-depth analysis (in Appendix B) of seven state systems that illustrate the strengths and challenges of developing these systems. Our key question: What accountability policies can states put in place to support the efficacy of the new common standards and assessments, and what should they be looking to overhaul or improve?

### *Situating this Report*

This report is a pilot study intended to inform a larger analysis of the accountability systems in every state (and the District of Columbia) during the early years of Common Core implementation. We ask that the reader treat it as such and provide us with feedback on the accountability principles contained herein.<sup>4</sup> We plan to apply these principles, once revised, to all fifty state accountability systems in order to appraise their quality. Our first national report is slated for early 2013, with follow-up studies two and four years later. Tracking systems in this manner will prove beneficial because many states will be in “flux” over the next several years as they refine and adapt their systems based on the demands of the Common Core and on the plans and promises outlined in their recently approved waivers (and/or those provisions detailed by ESEA reauthorization legislation—assuming Congress one day gets its act together).

Fordham is also conducting three other studies pertinent to CCSS implementation. The first is an analysis of Common Core implementation costs; the second, an in-depth study of district-level implementation of CCSS; and the third, a nationally representative survey of English language arts teachers that assesses the rigor of their reading assignments both before and after implementation of CCSS (summer 2012 and spring 2015).<sup>5</sup>

### *Acknowledgments*

Many thanks go to Eileen Reed, educational consultant, and Gerilyn Slicker, George Washington University graduate student and 2012 TFA corps member, who

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<sup>4</sup> Feedback can be emailed to [accountability-metric@edexcellence.net](mailto:accountability-metric@edexcellence.net).

<sup>5</sup> See also previous Fordham Institute publications relevant to the Common Core, including *The Common Core and the Future of Student Assessment in Ohio* (August 2011); *Now What? Imperatives and Options for Common Core Implementation and Governance* (October 2010); *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010* (July 2010); *Common Education Standards: Tackling the Long-Term Questions* (June 2010); *Review of the Draft K-12 Common Core Standards* (March 2010); and *Stars by Which to Navigate? Scanning National and International Standards in 2009* (October 2009).

conducted much of the background research and drafted an early version of the report. At the Fordham Institute, Amber Winkler, vice president for research, and Janie Scull, research analyst and production manager, updated the content and edited the final draft.

Many individuals also provided feedback or assistance during the course of this study. For our seven state accountability profiles, we interviewed state and district representatives in each state, as well as stakeholders working outside of the education system. We also conducted interviews with representatives from a handful of national-level education organizations. Because these interviews elicited candid commentary on both the structure and functionality of the state accountability systems, we keep these names anonymous. In addition, we solicited feedback from a number of national and local stakeholders on our draft metric, including, but not limited to: Kerri Briggs (George W. Bush Institute), Michael Cohen (Achieve), Linda Noonan (Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education), Alissa Peltzman (Achieve), Elliot Regenstein (Education Counsel), and Judith Rizzo (Hunt Institute).

Generous support for this project was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as by our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. A big thank you goes out to the Fordham team for assistance on this project, especially Chester E. Finn, Jr., Michael J. Petrilli, and Kathleen Porter-Magee, for their project guidance and feedback, and to Tyson Eberhardt and Joe Portnoy for dissemination.