

The Common Core Changes Almost Everything

By Michael W. Kirst

The full policy implications of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Mathematics and English Language Arts K–12 are just beginning to unfold across the 45 states (and Washington, D.C.) that are working to implement them. The CCSS will affect almost all key state and local education policies in fundamental ways. As we learned from the 1990–2005 era of systemic state standards-based reform, when academic standards change, so do policies related to student assessment and school accountability. Moreover, we must align and harmonize many other specific policies, including state curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, K–12 and college assessment, K–12 finance, professional development, teacher evaluation/preparation, and preschool.

State and local policymakers must eliminate contradictions between policies and look for gaps where no policy currently exists. Examples are instructional transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten and newly aligned policies such as those concerning professional development that have sufficient breadth and depth to cover all teachers.

In the past, the introduction of ambitious learning standards conflicted with assessment policy because existing multiple-choice assessments failed to measure the deeper learning needed by students and provided too little information to teachers about student performance. This conflict should be mitigated with the CCSS because an equal amount of effort is going into the development of next generation, computer-adaptive student assessment systems that will more robustly measure student learning against the standards.

Education policy is crafted within a complex educational governance structure that includes schools, school districts, and intermediate education agencies along with a wide variety of state and federal agencies. All of these agencies have overlapping responsibilities and must work together to create coherent education policies.

Standards, Frameworks, and Instructional Materials

The Common Core standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn from kindergarten through grade 12 in the areas of mathematics and English language arts (including literacy standards for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects). Although standards designate what students should learn at specific grade levels, local curriculum frameworks provide guidelines and research-based approaches to instruction to ensure optimal learning for all students. Frameworks also include guidance and criteria for publishers who are developing instructional materials aligned to the standards. Most local schools need to update, revise, and align English language development standards for English language learners to meet the Common Core standards.

Local districts must determine curricular priorities and adopt supplemental and core materials for kindergarten through high school according to their specific needs for supporting student success. Common Core implementation will take more technology than is currently available in most schools because the deeper learning goals and assessments within the Common Core standards are enhanced using technology.

Implementation of the CCSS will require new types of data on deeper learning and skill application that were not anticipated when most data systems were designed.

Assessment Programs

Local schools must address some key considerations, including the following:

- The extent to which local education agencies will develop assessments for grades and subjects not required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).¹
- The future of the high school exit examination requirements.
- The relationship between local secondary pupil assessments and college and career readiness standards in the CCSS.
- The roles of the state and local schools in developing diagnostic, interim, or formative assessments.
- The use, if any, of matrix sampling testing to minimize individual pupil testing time.
- The use of technology to enhance assessments and provide more rapid feedback to teachers, parents, and students.
- The assurance that assessments are fair, reliable, and valid for all pupils, including English language learners, students with disabilities, and pupils who may have limited access to technology.

A Variety of Other Policies That Need to Be Aligned

Classroom implementation of the CCSS will require massive and deep professional development aligned to the new learning expectations of the Common Core standards. Educators and administrators will need to overhaul teacher preparation programs and teacher professional standards to accommodate the new standards. Districts will need to revamp local teacher and principal evaluation systems during the transition to Common Core assessment starting in 2015. It will be some time before valid trend data on student assessments will be available for teacher/principal evaluation because prior state assessments featured traditional multiple choice formats only.

Some educators are concerned that career and technical education (CTE) is not sufficiently represented in the CCSS. Consequently, districts need to redesign CTE occupation clusters to meet Common Core standards. But how to measure student preparation for career readiness is largely unknown.

Districts must better integrate early childhood education with K–12 education. A better instructional progression from prekindergarten to 2nd grade could be an important boost for meeting Common Core standards in primary grades. But in most localities, diverse public and private preschool providers and K–12 school systems do not have a close relationship.

¹ ESEA requires states to assess all pupils each year in grades 3–8 and at least once in high school in the subjects of English language arts and mathematics. In addition, ESEA requires that the state assess the English language proficiency of all English language learner pupils in kindergarten through grade 12. The results of these assessments are used for state and federal accountability purposes.

Aligned Policies Between K–12 and Postsecondary Institutions

Inadequate K–12 preparation is one major cause of dismal college completion results, but inadequate college programs and policies also play a role. In addition, students' lack of money, long work hours, and social/family obligations are important contributors to low postsecondary completion results. Working alone, neither K–12 nor postsecondary education can solve the lack of student success. They must work together to accomplish their mutual goal of increasing rates of student college completion. Many of the problems with college preparation emanate from the growing disconnect between K–12 and higher education on issues of policy, finance, academic standards, and communication. The role of the senior year in high school as a platform for postsecondary general education is rarely discussed. Nor is there a widely shared conception of postsecondary general education that tightly links the academic content of high schools to the first two years of college.

The CCSS were designed in part to close the gap between K–12 and postsecondary education. For example, the new assessments now being developed will send students and parents reliable signals about college readiness in the primary and middle grades. Grade 11 assessments will provide clear guidance for an individual student's college readiness.

In sum, prior to the Common Core standards, the K–12 curriculum was largely unmoored from the freshman and sophomore college curriculum and from any continuous vision of general education. Policymakers for secondary and postsecondary schools worked in separate orbits that rarely intersected. The implementation of CCSS provides a unique opportunity to strengthen alignment across the divide between K–12 and postsecondary education. The Common Core–aligned revision of the ACT and SAT that will be phased in by 2015 is a positive development for more coherent K–16 policy.

Accountability

All of the changes outlined here will require a major rethinking of state and local accountability systems and indicators. Educators will need to supplement test scores by new indices using multiple indicators. For example, California has several state priorities, including the following:

- Pupil achievement
- Pupil engagement
- School climate
- Parental involvement
- Access to a broad course of study

Moreover, Common Core assessments will measure a more robust array of academic attainment that includes metacognition elements that ask students to explain, prove, derive, construct, investigate, build, interpret, and estimate. Performance assessments have rarely been used in state or local accountability considerations but are an integral part of the Common Core standards.

Looking to the Future

Essentially, the Common Core standards are trying to implement a 21st century vision of K–12 education using 20th century local school structures, resources, and culture. The integrated research and development to build more effective teaching practice, tools, and resources is only now under way. In the previous era of standards-based reform, states and localities often spent less on local capacity building than was necessary to meet new accountability requirements.

The CCSS will require a major communications campaign to garner educator and public understanding and support. Local educators cannot view the new assessments as just another test or attempt to convert Common Core standards to a scripted curriculum. Educators must understand how the Common Core standards will affect their careers and teaching practices. Surveys indicate very low public awareness of the Common Core standards, which will require a significant communications effort to overcome. A public backlash may occur if assessment scores drop during the initial phase of Common Core implementations or if technology problems hinder initial implementation.

The Common Core initiative is much more than just a new array of standards. It provides a new vision for teaching and learning that builds on reforms that states and districts began in the 1990s. Implementation will require sustained political support and the ability of educators to persist and change.

References

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Michael W. Kirst is Professor Emeritus at Stanford University and president of California State Board of Education.