



The “Common Core” Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Obama administration advocates for education standards designed to make all high school graduates “college- and career-ready.” To achieve this end, the administration is exerting pressure on states to adopt content standards, known as the “common core,” being developed by the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (NGA/CCSSO). The administration has, for example, called for federal Title I aid to be withheld from states that do not adopt these or comparable standards. To date, 48 states are at least tentatively participating in the standards effort, thus suggesting that the result might become *de facto* national standards.

Contentions about global competitiveness provide a key rationale given for common standards, along with increasing equity and streamlining the reform process. The analysis presented here suggests that the data do not support these contentions. U.S. states with high academic standards fare no better (or worse) than those identified as having low academic standards. Research support for standards-driven, test-based accountability systems is similarly weak. And nations with centralized standards generally tend to perform no better (or worse) on international tests than those without.

The NGA/CCSSO standards-development process was completed quickly—in approximately one year—by Achieve, Inc., a private contractor. This brief raises several concerns about the development, content, and use of those 500 pages of standards and supporting documents. For instance, the level of input from school-based practitioners appears to be minimal, the standards themselves have not been field tested, and it is unclear whether the tests used to measure the academic outcomes of common standards will have sufficient validity to justify the high-stakes consequences that will likely arise around their use. Accordingly, it seems improbable that the common core standards will have the positive effects on educational quality or equality being sought by proponents, particularly in light of the lack of essential capacity at the local, state and federal levels.

Recommendations:

- The NGA/CCSSO common core standards initiative should be continued, but only as a low-stakes advisory and assistance tool for states and local districts for the purposes of curriculum improvement, articulation and professional development.

- The NGA/CCSSO common core standards should be subjected to extensive validation, trials and subsequent revisions before implementation. During this time, states should be encouraged to carefully examine and experiment with broad-based school-evaluation systems.
- Given the current strengths and weaknesses in testing and measurement, policymakers should not implement high-stakes accountability systems where the assessments are inadequate for such purposes.