

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On Implementing Common Standards

**Editor's Note:** There is ongoing debate about the implementation of common-core standards. These standards have widespread implications for curriculum, teacher training, student assessment, and technology planning. This Spotlight follows the latest developments, state-by-state, and looks at the key players influencing the process of implementation.

*Published in Education Week, July 22, 2011*

# Common-Core Writers Craft Curriculum Criteria

By Catherine Gewertz

**N**ew guidelines on crafting curriculum materials for the common standards in English/language arts are reigniting debate about how to ensure a marketplace of good instructional materials for the new standards without crossing the line into telling teachers how to teach.

The focal point of the conversations is a set of “publishers’ criteria” issued recently by the two lead writers of the English/language arts section of the common standards, which have been adopted by all but five states.

Working under a contract with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, an avid backer of the standards, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel wrote a pair of documents highlighting the key ideas of the standards and describing the qualities of instructional materials they consider a faithful reflection of them.

Vetted informally among publishers, researchers, state officials, teachers, and others, the documents are being circulated more widely now, and are eventually headed for posting online to guide not only publishers, but also anyone developing curriculum for the standards.

The criteria center on aspects of the standards that represent a significant shift. The heart of that shift is an intense focus on close examination of text as the source for study across disciplines. Students are expected to learn how to conquer increasingly complex readings,

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both literary and informational; infer meaning from what they read, and build arguments based on evidence from the text. The guidelines discourage work that does not demand deep understanding of the studied text.

“Eighty to 90 percent of the reading standards in each grade require text-dependent analysis; accordingly, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions,” say the criteria for grades 3-12.

“Materials should be sparing in offering activities that are not text dependent,” say the criteria for grades K-2. “Whether written or spoken, responses based on students’ background knowledge and the experiences they bring to school are not sufficient.”

The impetus behind the criteria, Ms. Pimentel and Mr. Coleman said in a joint phone interview, was to respond to teachers’ requests for support by helping them focus on the cornerstones of the standards and understand how classroom work will have to change to reflect them.

“It’s almost a betrayal to support setting higher standards without some effort in that direction,” Mr. Coleman said.

“If we’re asking students to be able to look at text and draw evidence from it, it means they need to be given text, with good teacher support, but without a lot of excessive spoon-feeding up front,” Ms. Pimentel said.

Questions play a crucial role in helping students master what they’re reading, she said. She cited a question that might be posed by instructional materials or by a teacher: “In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln says the nation is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Why is equality an important value to promote?”

“It gets kids off and running, but we’ve totally left the text,” Ms. Pimentel said. “They don’t need the text to answer that question.”

## Validating Materials

The two publishers’ criteria documents, totaling 24 pages, land in a swirl of discussion about how to create good curricula for the common-core standards, which emerged from an initiative led by the nation’s governors and state schools chiefs. One central tension in the discussion has

been trying to address the need for instructional tools without dictating pedagogy; another has been the question of who should shape curriculum design.

Leading advocates of the standards have been trying to think through possible approaches to validating curricula as sound embodiments of the standards. They have discussed creating a panel of experts to review materials for alignment, or designing a validation process that educators and publishers could use.

But no moves have been made to do either, partly because other sectors’ models don’t translate well to education and partly because of sensitivity to issues of influence over curriculum, according to participants in those talks.

The Gates Foundation, for instance, has convened conversations that included representatives from other sectors, among them the environmental-protection and food industries, to talk about how their certification processes might inform parallel work in the curriculum world.

Jamie McKee, who helps lead common-standards work for the Seattle-based Gates Foundation, said that while the foundation “cares deeply about the quality of the [instructional] materials that come from the common core,” it hasn’t yet decided whether it favors a panel or process for validating such materials.

The foundation continues to listen to a range of views about “what comes next for the standards, and how to find the right balance” between helping the field produce a range of sound instructional materials and wading into judgments about products, she said.

## Teacher Training

Some of those involved in the discussions about curriculum validation see the publishers’ criteria as a way to offset the need for any official certification process or body, by responding to educators’ requests for guidance and building the field’s grassroots knowledge about good curriculum.

“These new publishers’ guidelines are a way to have that conversation quickly and in a nonthreatening

way,” said Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based group that represents the country’s largest districts.

Linda P. Chen, the deputy chief of the office of teaching and learning in the 154,000-student Philadelphia schools, said the criteria will help the district’s teachers as they adapt to the standards. They’ve been crafting performance-based tasks to gauge learning, and the criteria can help teachers think about the design of those tasks, she said.

She worries, however, that it will be difficult for teachers and for district and state curriculum officials to evaluate publishers’ claims that their materials reflect the new criteria.

“You really have to know your stuff in order to know whether or not they’re quality materials,” Ms. Chen said. And she cautioned that the new standards are at “such a high level” that intensive professional development—not just curricular criteria and materials—will be required for teachers to make the transition.

Educational publishing companies see that need as well. James O’Neill, the senior vice president of K-12 portfolio management at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, said good teaching of the common core will require far more than “handing out new sets of materials.”

“There is a huge teacher-training element here, and from a business standpoint, that is our highest demand right now,” he said. “Professional development is what’s driving the common-core market.”

The new publishers’ criteria are “incredibly helpful” as Boston-based Houghton Mifflin designs materials for the common standards, Mr. O’Neill said. But the uptake of materials that truly reflect the big changes called for in the standards lies in the hands of the states and districts that decide whether to buy them, he said.

“These criteria aren’t a cookbook for publishers,” he said. “The cookbook is provided by the states and districts. That’s who we take our lead from. Those are our customers. Everything depends on how they interpret the standards and put their curriculum together.”

““ This isn’t just a description of what curriculum should look like, it’s a teaching guide. I’m afraid people will take this and say, ‘This is what instruction has to look like.’”

**BARBARA A. KAPINUS**

Senior policy analyst,  
National Education  
Association

Some leaders in the field take issue with the publishers' criteria. Barbara Cambridge, the director of the Washington office of the National Council of Teachers of English, said her organization agrees that it's important to articulate how materials should reflect the standards. But the new publishers' criteria "signal a usurpation of teacher judgment in ways that are alarming."

### Wading Into Pedagogy?

For instance, the K-2 criteria advise teachers to read texts aloud to pupils themselves rather than use recordings, when there might be "perfectly legitimate places to use recordings" in the classroom, Ms. Cambridge said. She also faulted the document for shortchanging the value of children's own experiences in responding to what they read.

"The way we learn something new is to attach it to something we already know," she said. "So of course what kids bring to school isn't sufficient, but it's important. And to imply we shouldn't spend time on it, with 1st and 2nd graders, is just bad advice."

Barbara A. Kapinus, who helped shape the standards as a senior policy analyst with the National Education Association, said she was upset by the way the publishers' criteria ventured into pedagogy. For instance, she said, advising that "fluency should be a particular focus" of materials for 2nd graders could lead teachers to put a premium on it, despite the developmental variations in when children reach fluency.

She also criticized the criteria for advising teachers to teach reading strategies only "in service of reading comprehension, not as a separate body of material." Good reading instruction, she said, requires pulling out and practicing specific skills.

"This isn't just a description of what curriculum should look like, it's a teaching guide," Ms. Kapinus said. "I'm afraid people will take this and say, 'This is what instruction has to look like.'"

Mr. Coleman and Ms. Pimentel said they did not intend the criteria to be a teaching guide and are open to feedback about revisions that would address those concerns.

Some policymakers who oppose the standards saw the criteria as a step toward concentrating too much influence over curriculum and instruction in the hands of too few people.

"The very people writing [the standards] are the ones telling everyone else

how you're supposed to comply," said Walt Chappell, a member of the Kansas state board of education. "What we have is a group of people dictating to everyone else what's to be taught in every classroom, to every student."

Mr. Coleman said the criteria were an attempt to do the opposite: to "distribute power, to give people the understanding they need to make decisions" about curricular materials.

What some see as a concentration of influence, others see as welcome guidance from valued sources.

"A lot of people have been looking to the writers for some guidance about how to interpret the standards," said Mr. Caserly. "A lot of us thought that some loose guidance to the publishers and school districts would be helpful here as they tried to deal with immediate questions about their materials."

Dane Linn, who helped lead the common-standards initiative for the National Governors Association and worked with Mr. Coleman and Ms. Pimentel on the publishers' criteria, said the new documents were intended as resources states and districts can use or not, as they wish. They also can serve as a way for publishers to show they have "held themselves to a higher standard" by reflecting the intent of the standards, Mr. Linn said.

One of the most important things such guidelines can do, some say, is to show the education field where it needs to boost its own strength.

"I think [the criteria] help build capacity among the decisionmakers, who are state and local curriculum people," said Jack Jennings, the president of the Center on Education Policy, a Washington-based group that is tracking states' efforts to implement the standards. "It helps people figure out what to think about as they design or choose curriculum, and it asks, 'Do you have people with the expertise and judgment to do this well?' That's an important question."

*Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).*

Published in *Education Week*, July 7, 2011

# State Consortium Scales Back Common-Test Design

By Catherine Gewertz

A student-achievement test under consideration by nearly half the states has been redesigned to ease their concerns that it would cost too much, shape curriculum, and eat up too much instructional time.

The change was announced last week by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, one of two state consortia using federal Race to the Top funds to craft shared assessments. The tests are for the common academic standards in mathematics and English/language arts that most states have adopted.

Currently, 24 states and the District of Columbia belong to PARCC. Thirty belong to the other group, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium. More than half the states in each group have pledged to use the tests, while others—including a half-dozen that belong to both groups—are still weighing their options.

PARCC's original proposal featured a "through-course" design, in which tests would be given after teachers completed one-quarter, one-half, three-quarters, and 90 percent of instruction. Some of those tests were to be in the form of essays and performance tasks, and others were to be quick-turnaround, computer-based exams. All four required components were to be combined into one end-of-year summative score, which states would use for accountability required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

A fifth element, a test of students' speaking and listening skills, was to be given after three-quarters of instruction but not included in the summative score.

At a June 24 meeting, however, the 15 states that make up PARCC's governing board reduced the number of components in the summative score to two in each subject—one computer-based test and one exam of essays and performance tasks—and placed them close to the end of the school year.

Additional flexibility was added to the speaking-and-listening test, so states can give it when they choose. The first two compo-

nents were made optional and re-envisioned as a way for states to produce feedback for teachers to help guide instruction.

## Concerns Weighed

Mitchell Chester, the chairman of PARCC's governing board and the commissioner of elementary and secondary education in Massachusetts, said the changes came in response to feedback from states that giving five tests each year would be too costly and consume too much classroom time.

They also were prompted, he said, by concerns raised by states, school districts, and various national policy advocates that the quarterly tests would essentially dictate the content and pacing of curriculum. That worry has been sparking intense debate in policy circles. Some have argued that curriculum would be unduly influenced by the federal government because it is funding the work of the assessment consortia, which includes not only tests but a range of instructional resources. (*See Education Week, Feb. 23, 2011.*)

"We want to make sure that variations in states' curricula are honored through this process and not dictated by the structure of the tests," Mr. Chester said in a phone interview. "We also want to make sure there is flexibility in the growing movement toward personalization of learning in curriculum and instruction. We didn't want to design a system that would hamstring our educators."

The changes in test design are not final until they are approved by the U.S. Department of Education. In seeking proposals last year, the department outlined the many uses it wanted the tests to serve, including measuring student achievement and learning gains, and the effectiveness of teachers, principals, and schools. It also wanted tests to produce useful feedback for teachers to help them shape instruction.

Mr. Chester said that most states in PARCC "are committed" to using the two optional components, for formative or instructional purposes. But it seemed likely that money would be a major factor in that decision.

"Cost would probably dictate some of

“ We didn't want to design a system that would hamstring our educators.”

MITCHELL CHESTER

Chairman of PARCC's governing board; Commissioner of elementary and secondary education in Massachusetts

whether we would participate in the first two options," said Gloria Turner, the director of assessment and accountability in Alabama, which belongs to both consortia.

She said she was pleased to see that PARCC had listened to state and district concerns about the test, and had responded with a change in design. The assessment's potential effect shaping the scope and sequence of curriculum, in particular, was "a main concern" in Alabama districts and in the state education department, she said.

The change in design pointed up a potential either-or choice for states, some experts said. States can address concerns about cost and excessive testing by not using the two now-optional components, but by doing so, they would forgo the instructional feedback that is one of the key improvements sought in these "next generation" testing systems.

## Design Tensions

Douglas J. McRae, a retired psychometrician who is based in California and helped design that state's assessments, welcomed the design change as an overdue separation of the test's dual uses: as a formative tool, to gauge how instruction is going; and a summative one, to measure learning when instruction is complete.

PARCC's first design, he said, "violated an underlying design-feature tension" by blending formative and summative functions into



one test that would be used for accountability. One test can't be used effectively for both, Mr. McRae said.

"Frankly, I think the design feature required by the [federal education department] for both assessment consortia ... was flawed by attempting to put both types of assessment under one roof," he said in an email. "The two types of assessment are both needed but belong under separate roofs."

Choosing to use the optional components could create problems by giving some states an edge over others in the summative score, said Tom Loveless, who follows assessment issues as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

"Components one and two could end up serving as practice tests for [components] three and four and influencing test results," he said. "It's essentially a sneak peek, and it calls comparability into question."

Mr. Chester said PARCC test designers are mulling whether some states could elect to use the second optional component—a performance-based test—as a third piece to be rolled into the summative score while others use only the two required components. The question, he said, is whether that could be allowed without sacrificing comparability of test results across all consortium states.

Some leaders in the assessment world said it was inevitable that PARCC would have to change its through-course design.

"Everybody predicted this from the beginning," said one source, who asked not to be identified because of his employer's working relationships with both assessment consortia. "It was only a matter of time until people figured out that it would create curriculum issues and would cost a lot."

But the changes are good ones, the source said, because they offer states the chance to funnel more attention to high-quality performance tasks that deserve to shape instruction, and they enhance the chances of gaining support for the test by minimizing the "political distraction" of arguments about cost and curriculum control.

Joe Willhoft, the executive director of the SMARTER Balanced consortium, said that group has no plans right now to change its original test design, having received "favorable responses" on it from member states, technical experts, and other stakeholders.

*Published in Education Week, June 8, 2011*

# Modifications Planned for 'New Generation' Common-Core Tests

By Nirvi Shah

**W**hen Michael Hock was a special education teacher, he spent hours slicing quarter-inch slits in the center of index cards so that his students could use them to isolate individual words and sentences while taking standardized tests.

When a new generation of tests—the common-core assessments—is unveiled in a few years, special education teachers should be able to put away their index cards and all the other shortcuts and homemade solutions they have created over the years to make paper-and-pencil tests accessible for many students with disabilities.

That's because the new, computerized tests will have accommodations for most students with disabilities built right in.

Using \$360 million in federal Race to the Top money, two state collaboratives are designing tests for the new common standards in mathematics and English/language arts that have been adopted by 44 states and the District of Columbia. The federal government expects the tests to be ready by the 2014-15 school year.

The two groups tasked with developing the common-core assessments have been thinking about students with disabilities from the time they first won the grants from the U.S. Department of Education to design the tests. That's a sharp departure from what's been the norm in standardized testing, which has been to consider accommodations for students with disabilities as an afterthought.

"We're not even thinking about accommodations anymore" in the traditional sense, said Mr. Hock. He is now the director of educational assessment for the Vermont Department of Education and co-chair of the accessibility and accommodations work group for the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium—one of the two groups developing the new tests.

The other test consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College

and Careers, or PARCC, will soon launch an accessibility-and-fairness technical working group, said Laura M. Slover, the senior vice president of Achieve and the project manager for the Washington-based nonprofit organization's work with the consortium.

## Back-End Band-Aids

For years, most states have tried retrofitting exams designed to test students' knowledge in math, reading, science, and writing for students with special needs. But those back-end Band-Aids can create their own set of issues, not the least of which is coordinating testing so that students who need similar adaptations are grouped together and tested at the same time.

"It was a logistical nightmare," said Carol André, the special education director at Exeter High School in Exeter, N.H. "And you still had the same issue with testing: You don't even know if the results you're getting are accurate."

When making current state tests work for all students, there is inconsistency from school to school, she said. In particular, when teachers or proctors are allowed to read portions of a test aloud for students, the way that information is read can vary widely.

"We had to all but police our own people to be sure they were not giving the kids an unfair advantage or leg up. It was really hard, especially for our younger kids. The adults desperately want them to do well," Ms. André said. "Suddenly, without even being conscious of it, you may have an adult who's reading the question and the four answers but they're doing a little more emphasis on choice C, or the kid is reading the adult's expression."

On the new generation of computerized tests, it's likely that words that can be read aloud will be read in the same way, in the same voice, from state to state, Mr. Hock said.

"We're not trying to provide anyone with any kind of advantage," he added. "That's what we're trying to avoid."

At Vergennes Union High School and Middle School in Vergennes, Vt., special education teacher Suzanne Buck remembers one paper test that was created for a student with vision problems.

“The test was huge. It stuck out so badly. Everyone else could read it from four rows behind,” Ms. Buck said.

### Glimpse Ahead

Now, to test students in science, her school is using an exam designed in much the way the future common-core assessments could be. The current version of the science test for students in the New England Common Assessment Program, a collaboration of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, is computerized. Some of the test features for students with disabilities were designed by the Nimble Innovation Lab at Measured Progress, a test-development company in Newton, Mass.

For students with special needs, portions of the test can be magnified right on the screen. Such features also can be turned on and off, so only students for whom they are allowed may access them.

The science test also offers individual students the ability to highlight or obscure words on the screen and play background music or sounds to keep the students calm or focused, a feature intended for students with attention disorders.

Mr. Hock also envisions other features, such as the option of changing the color of the text or allowing students to change the contrast of what they are reading. These features could help students with visual impairments and some types of reading-based learning disabilities, he said.

“The idea of making tests accessible, it’s a social-justice issue,” Mr. Hock said. “And we want to accurately measure every kid’s skills.”

Like the current tests, the adaptive features that students would be able to use on the new computerized tests would have to be specified in their individualized education programs, and before test day, they would get a chance to practice using those features.

For some students, the future tests may be translated into different languages. The SMARTER Balanced group has a federal grant of about \$10 million in addition to its basic test-development grant to translate its math test into American Sign Language, Spanish, and three other languages.

“The kids who use American Sign Language present unique challenges,” Mr. Hock said. “It’s not signed English. It’s a language all its own.”

But having an interpreter translate a test

isn’t always possible, or practical, for every student who needs one. One idea the Nimble Innovation Lab has experimented with is a sign-language avatar that would appear on screen when a deaf student opts to use it, said Jennifer Higgins, the research manager at the lab.

### Interpreter Avatars

And, as with readers, all signers aren’t usually signing exactly alike, she said. But a computer-generated avatar would sign the same way for everyone.

“The consistency and reliability would be improved over what we have now,” Ms. Higgins said. Also, an avatar that moves its lips and signs at the same time would cost less than trying to find real people to sign for students in person or recording videos of a real person signing an entire test.

“The way it is now, you have who-knows-how-many people delivering these tests in all these states. This would be significantly cheaper than that,” Ms. Higgins said.

While the computerized tests could address many of the challenges paper-and-pencil tests now pose for students with disabilities, administering the tests could remain a challenge. (*See Education Week, April 27, 2011.*)

At Ms. Buck’s 600-student school in Vermont, while computerized versions of the science test were available for 11th and 8th graders, the school chose to use them only with 11th graders because the testing window was the same for both groups, and the school doesn’t have enough computers to give everyone the test at once.

And the tests still won’t meet the needs of all students with special needs. The assessment consortia are charged with creating exams for 99 percent of students. For the remaining 1 percent of students with significant cognitive disabilities, separate exams are being designed.

Regardless of the challenges, the new generation of tests will offer a huge advantage, Ms. Buck said, compared to that large-type print test: The accommodating features are discreet. “It’s built in. They all took the assessment online,” she said. “No one knew the person next to them was having it read to them.”

Published March 9, 2011, in *Education Week*

# Leaders Urge Shared Curriculum Guidelines Across States

## Diverse group says framework needed for new common standards

By Catherine Gewertz

**S**eventy-five respected leaders in education, business, and government issued a call this week to devise shared curriculum guidelines for the new common standards.

The move is notable for finding common ground on a sensitive topic among an ideologically diverse group of thinkers. Signatories include political liberals and conservatives, and those with varying views on controversial education issues such as charter schools, testing policy, and ways to evaluate and compensate teachers.

Among them are university scholars such as Harvard University's William Julius Wilson; former top federal education officials in both Democratic and Republican administrations, such as Chester E. Finn Jr., Susan B. Neuman, and Marshall "Mike" Smith; business leaders such as IBM Corp. Vice President Stanley S. Litow; union officials such as American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten; and urban schools superintendents such as Andrés Alonso of Baltimore.

Brought together by the Albert Shanker Institute, a Washington think tank named for the AFT's late president, the signatories issued a statement March 7 titled "A Call for Common Content: Core Curriculum Must Build a Bridge From Standards to Achievement."

They emphasized, however, that they are not advocating one prescriptive learning plan for all children, but one or more "curricular guides" to help translate the common standards in mathematics and English/language arts, adopted by all but seven states, into sound curriculum and accompanying resources.

"To be clear, by 'curriculum,' we mean a coherent, sequential set of guidelines in the core academic disciplines, specifying the content knowledge and skills that all students are expected to learn, over time, in a thoughtful progression across the grades," the document

says. "We do not mean performance standards, textbook offerings, daily lesson plans, or rigid pedagogical prescriptions."

The signatories acknowledged that with the nation's history of state and local control over education, "the very idea of common curriculum guidance will strike many as overly controversial."

### No 'Straitjacket'

But "common curriculum guidance does not represent a straitjacket or a narrowing of learning possibilities," they said. For instance, if the guide calls for 4th graders to study the solar system, accompanying materials could suggest ways to teach it. Some teachers could ask students to spend a week building scale models, while others might choose to give a lecture with accompanying video, and still others might weave the topic into lessons about the chemical properties of gases and solids or have students draw or write about the characteristics of the planets.

States' use of the guidelines would be "purely voluntary" and would account for no more than 60 percent of what is taught in classrooms, leaving ample room for regional variations. The guides would begin with math and English/language arts, but eventually encompass other areas such as history, the sciences, foreign languages, and the arts, the document says.

### National Content?

Despite the arguments of the signatories, some viewed the manifesto as a call for national curriculum. Frederick M. Hess, the director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington-based think tank, declined to sign it in part for that reason. Mr. Hess said he believes that shared curriculum guidelines "violate the spirit of the common standards," which he supports.

"They were carefully crafted to be agnostic on curriculum, so that there would be lots of different ways to organize scope and sequence, and create and deliver materials, and so educators and state leaders could embrace them whatever their stands in debates about pedagogy, the desirability of school autonomy, and the wars about what to read," said Mr. Hess, who advocates choice in many aspects

of education.

"They can't go on about a 'coherent, substantive, sequential' plan for the 'knowledge and skills' students need and still claim there is enormous room for people to come out with all kinds of instructional and curricular materials," he said. "What they're pushing is a national model of instruction."

Not so, said Stanford University professor of education Linda Darling-Hammond, a signatory to the paper. The group is calling for a "very lean approach" to outlining the knowledge and skills students need "in some reasonable sequence," as is done in Finland and Japan, where a K-12 math curriculum might run a total of 10 pages, she said. The actual curricular units and lesson plans are then left to educators to develop, she said.

"We're trying to make a case for the fact that it matters how we organize curriculum for instruction," she said. "Teachers need that set of curriculum tools, and we need to be paying attention to that. This is not the highly prescriptive curriculum that many people think of in the United States. This is, 'What are the big ideas, what are the big concepts, that need to be taught for kids to acquire this set of knowledge and skills?'"

Mr. Finn, the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington, said he doesn't regard national standards or curriculum as "the devil's curse" if they're high-quality and voluntary. "It's dumb to have good standards not accompanied by good curriculum," he said.

The group also called for establishment of a "control body" of teachers, content experts, curriculum designers, cognitive scientists, and assessment experts to judge various curricula, textbooks, assessments, and other resources on how well they reflect the standards.

The paper is scheduled for publication in the spring edition of *American Educator*, the quarterly magazine of the AFT. The 1.5 million-member union called for shared core curriculum in the winter edition of the magazine.

At a recent AFT committee meeting, some teachers and top officers expressed concern that common assessments were being developed from the common standards with no curriculum in between. That concern is repeated in the Shanker Institute document. (See *Education Week*, March 2, 2011.)

Published in *Education Week*, May 18, 2011

# 'Manifesto' Proposing Shared Curriculum Draws Counterattack

By Catherine Gewertz

A group led by critics of the new common academic standards issued a manifesto last week arguing against development of shared curriculum and tests for those standards.

The document, signed by more than 100 leaders in education, business, and politics, most of them conservatives, is a response to a "call for common content" for the standards, issued in March by the Albert Shanker Institute, a Washington-based research and advocacy group named after the late president of the American Federation of Teachers. (See *Education Week*, March 9, 2011.)

Calling itself a "counter-manifesto," the paper is also a response to the U.S. Department of Education's \$360 million investment in the development of assessments and curricular supports for the common standards. That money was awarded to two large consortia of states as part of the federal government's Race to the Top competition.

"We do not agree that a one-size-fits-all, centrally controlled curriculum for every K-12 subject makes sense for this country or for any other sizable country," the document says.

Leaders of the Shanker paper strongly dispute the way the counter-manifesto characterizes their proposal.

## Objections Raised

The counter-manifesto represents the latest entry into the ongoing debate about common standards and assessments, which have drawn support from those who see them as ways to elevate student achievement and enhance American competitiveness, and criticism from those who view them as attempts to standardize education, undermine teachers' professional judgment, or erode local control of schools. All but six states have adopted the standards—spearheaded by governors and state schools' chiefs—and all but five are participating in the federally financed assessment consortia.

The latest manifesto was organized by

activists known for their opposition to the common standards: Williamson M. Evers, a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution think tank; Jay P. Greene and Sandra Stotsky, both professors at the University of Arkansas; Greg Forster, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Educational Choice, an Indianapolis-based school choice organization; and Ze'ev Wurman, a former federal Education Department official who has also helped shape California's standards and tests in math.

Lending support to the statement are figures from education policy, academics, politics, and business, including Harvard University math professor Wilfried Schmid; several members of state boards of education or state legislative education committees; former U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese III; former California Gov. Pete Wilson; and Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, co-authors of a controversial 2003 book on racial and ethnic achievement gaps.

## No 'Best' Approach

Signatories argue that shared curriculum and tests will stifle innovation, threaten local and state control of education decisions, and standardize learning for students with diverse needs. Arguments for a common curriculum are flawed, they contend, because there is no evidence that it would lead to higher student achievement or that there is one "best" approach to curriculum for all students. Additionally, they say, the standards are not sound enough to serve as the foundation for such a curriculum.

The new signatories also attack the assessment consortia's plans to develop curricular supports, such as model units. They argue that shared curriculum and assessments are prohibited by federal laws restricting the U.S. government's influence on curriculum, and by the U.S. Constitution, which defines which powers are held by Congress and which are reserved for states.

The assessment consortia and the Shanker Institute, as well as the AFT, which advocates common curriculum for the standards, have said that any curricular materials would be

“ This is about the deprofessionalization of teaching. Once you judge teachers and schools by test scores, not one bit of that system is voluntary: not teaching to the standards, and not teaching to the tests that go with them.”

ROBERT SCHROCK

Professor, who oversees the training of biology teachers, Emporia State University in Kansas

voluntary. The Shanker Institute manifesto, which now has more than 200 signatures, also says that it does not advocate one curriculum for all students, but multiple "curricular guides," based on the common standards, that would leave teachers free to impart those standards as they wish.

Since the federal government is subsidizing the consortia, which are designing curricular supports as well as tests, organizers of the counter-manifesto see the consortia's work as leading to "centralized control" of education at the federal level.

In calling for shared curriculum guides, the Shanker Institute and the AFT advocate a "more constrained and unified vision" of what students should learn that boils down to a "nationalization" of education, Mr. Greene said in an interview.

"I think it's odd that they are denying that they are trying to establish national curricu-



lum,” he said. “Their denials sound like weasel words: ‘Curriculum modules’ are not ‘curriculum.’ It just sounds like someone trying to impose national curriculum who doesn’t want to be called out for it. It would be more honest if they just said a national curriculum is good and defended it.”

Spokesmen for the two assessment consortia defended their work as providing support to teachers and schools, not dictating what they do.

“We appreciate the differing views and the debate surrounding the common core state standards,” Joe Willhoft, the executive director of the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, said in a statement. “We believe the assessment system we are developing will provide valuable support to teachers, students, parents, and other educational decisionmakers to help them improve student learning.”

### Marketplace of Choices

Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, which is the project-management partner for the other consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, said that the group is drafting a “content framework” that will define the types of skills PARCC’s test will measure, such as the level of complexity of text students should read or the sorts of responses that might be solicited. It will also offer “a handful” of model instructional units, which don’t constitute a complete—or required—curriculum.

“We’re not saying, ‘In 4th grade English/language arts, here are the four books students will read,’” he said. “A required curriculum would do that. A model curriculum might suggest that. Content frameworks for assessment don’t do either.”

Mr. Cohen noted that many people are working to devise curricular supports for the new standards: states, districts, the publishing industry, and organizations working with philanthropic support. Additionally, states that haven’t signed on to the common standards will still be teaching and testing to their own standards, he noted.

“It’s not like everybody is going to end up doing the same thing,” he said. “The net result of all this, I think, is that there will be a marketplace [of materials] from which educators can choose.”

Signers of the counter-manifesto did find one area of agreement with the Shanker Institute and the AFT: that curriculum should be developed before assessments. But such efforts should be decentralized and varied, not managed by an “elephantine, inside-the-Beltway bureaucracy,” they write.

Leaders of the Shanker Institute effort re-

leased a statement saying that the response to their manifesto “distorts” their purpose, which was to ensure that teachers have “access to voluntary curriculum guidelines” to help them shape instruction around the standards.

“Educators need and want a set of curricular roadmaps that are aligned to common standards and developed from various high-quality, content-rich, multiple curriculum resources, with strong input from teachers themselves and other curriculum experts,” said AFT President Randi Weingarten.

“Without these resources, especially in a time of tight education budgets, it will be up to teachers to make up all of this content aligned to standards as they go along, under the guise of local autonomy. That is a recipe for failure and unfair to both students and teachers.”

Some observers expressed frustration with the way arguments take shape about common standards, curriculum, and tests.

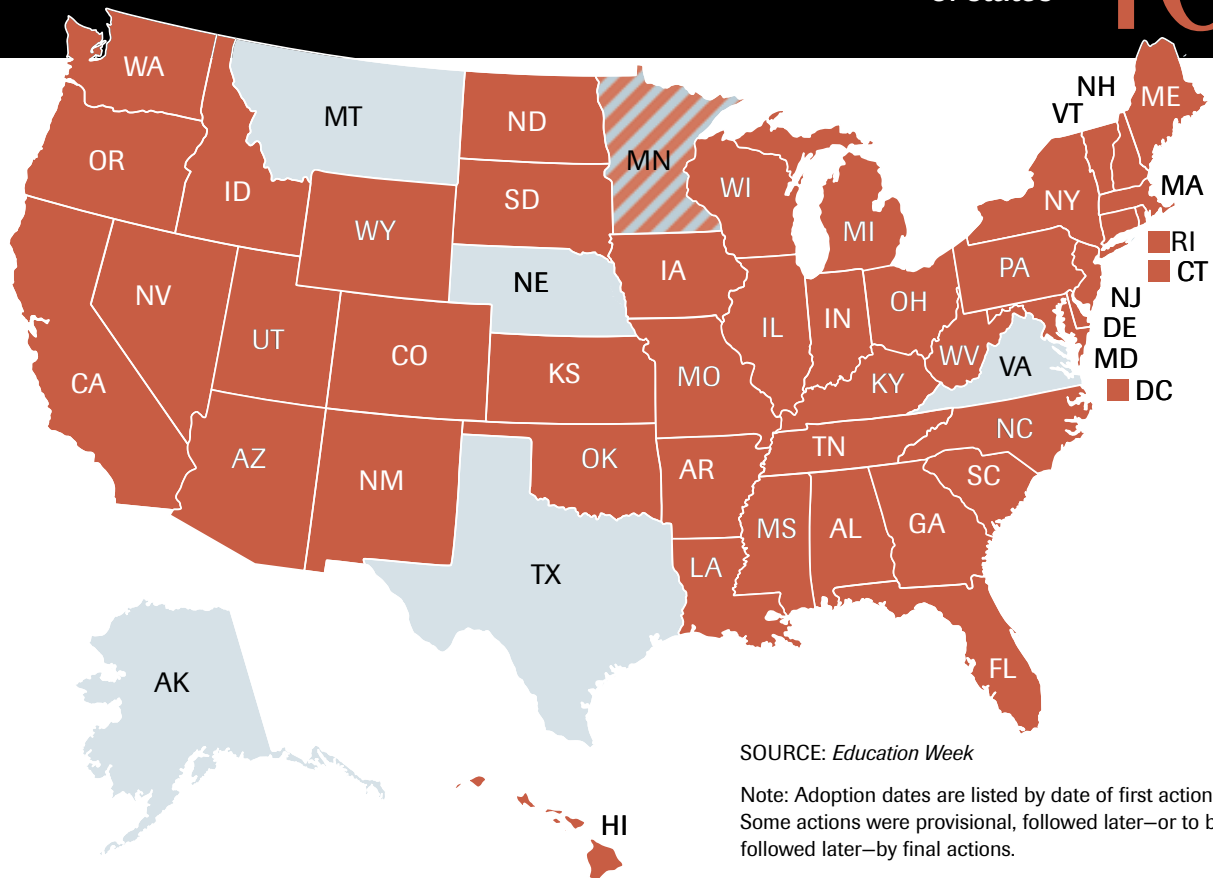
“It’s too bad that this is so often being framed as a liberal versus conservative issue,” said John Robert Schrock, a professor who oversees the training of biology teachers at Emporia State University in Kansas. “This is about the deprofessionalization of teaching. Once you judge teachers and schools by test scores, not one bit of that system is voluntary: not teaching to the standards, and not teaching to the tests that go with them.”

Grant Wiggins, a co-author of the Understanding by Design model of curriculum development, said he is frustrated with the repeated argument that having sound curriculum guidelines deprives teachers of their creativity.

“It’s a red herring,” he said. “By that argument, doctors and soccer coaches have no creativity. There are protocols in every profession. The creativity is in the coaching.”

# Common-Core Adoptions

Number of states **46**



SOURCE: *Education Week*

Note: Adoption dates are listed by date of first action. Some actions were provisional, followed later—or to be followed later—by final actions.

 State adopted standards in only one subject

## FEBRUARY 2010

10 Kentucky

## MAY

12 West Virginia

20 Hawaii

25 Maryland

## JUNE

2 Wisconsin

3 North Carolina

4 Utah

7 Ohio

15 Michigan

15 Missouri

16 New Jersey

16 Wyoming

18 Nevada

24 Illinois

24 Oklahoma

25 Mississippi

28 Arizona

## JULY

1 Louisiana

1 Pennsylvania

1 Rhode Island

7 Connecticut

8 Georgia

8 New Hampshire

12 Arkansas

14 South Carolina

19 New York

19 Washington

21 Massachusetts

21 Washington, D.C.

27 Florida

29 Iowa

30 Tennessee

## AUGUST

2 Colorado

2 California

3 Indiana

17 Vermont

19 Delaware

## SEPTEMBER

27 Minnesota

## OCTOBER

12 Kansas

19 New Mexico

28 Oregon

## NOVEMBER

17 Idaho

18 Alabama

29 South Dakota

## APRIL 2011

1 Maine

## JUNE

13 North Dakota

Published in *Education Week*, March 30, 2011

# Multiple 'Curriculum' Meanings Heighten Debate Over Standards

By Catherine Gewertz

**C**alls for shared curricula for the common standards have triggered renewed debates about who decides what students learn, and even about varied meanings of the word “curriculum,” adding layers of complexity to the job of translating the broad learning goals into classroom teaching.

The most recent calls for common curricula came from the American Federation of Teachers and the Albert Shanker Institute, a think tank named after the late AFT leader. Many others are working on pieces of that puzzle—an array of instructional resources for states, districts, and teachers. But the calls for “shared” or “common” curricula have sparked particularly heated conversations.

Scholars, bloggers, and activists are exchanging fire about whether shared curriculum means lessons dictated from afar. They’re worrying that the public could lose a voice in shaping what children learn, and asking whether the federal government is overstepping by funding curriculum development.

The common standards in English/language arts and math, devised by states and content experts under the guidance of governors and state education chiefs, have been adopted by all but seven states.

Part of the debate about common curriculum for the standards is driven, observers say, by the multiple meanings of the word “curriculum.”

To some, that term can mean a scripted, day-to-day lesson plan, while to others, it’s a lean set of big ideas that can be tackled in many ways. In some states, a textbook becomes the de facto curriculum. In others, standards and broad outlines called frameworks, with or without model lesson plans and other resources, are rolled together as “state curriculum.” Some school districts purchase off-the-shelf programs they refer to as curricula, and others craft their own.

Some observers worry that lack of clarity about the meaning of terms like “curriculum,” “frameworks,” and “curriculum guidelines” risks muddying a public dialogue about an

important issue.

“Curriculum is not always easy to define. But it’s crucial that we have clear understandings of what we mean by terms like this,” said J. Wesley Null, an associate professor of curriculum and the foundations of education at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. “Otherwise, we have curriculum being implemented that doesn’t do what states or districts hope it will do.”

## Local Control

As controversial as standards can be, curriculum can make people even more nervous because it edges closer to the classroom and to defining content, some experts say.

“That’s where dicey decisions need to be made. And curriculum, done really well, is going to involve some pedagogical decisions,” said Kathleen Porter-Magee, a former curriculum director for a charter school network who now oversees the standards program for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank. The Shanker Institute’s March 7 call for a “core curriculum” was attacked in some quarters as a threat to local control over what is taught. The 200 signatories advocated crafting one or more voluntary, broad outlines of key knowledge and skills, not dictating daily lessons or pedagogy.

Such distinctions are meaningless, said Neal P. McCluskey, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington. Decisions about even “big ideas” in curriculum will mold what happens in classrooms, he said.

“The whole point of having national standards is to drive curriculum,” Mr. McCluskey said. “When they start talking about curriculum, they’re putting meat on the bones of the standards. That gets closer and closer to the students.”

Additionally, Mr. McCluskey argued, the common assessments being developed with federal funds by two consortia of states will shape the curriculum. “Those tests will have to test something,” he said. “When they test specific readings, we will see that we now have a national curriculum.”

Some of the heat in the curriculum debate

“What’s stirring everything up here is the word ‘common’. It suggests everything is the same, when people know that curriculum has to be responsive. But we can think of ‘common’ as more like a town common, a place where we all meet.”

HEIDI HAYES JACOBS

New York-based curriculum consultant

stems from questions about the degree of granularity at issue. Does “curriculum” mean a high-level outline, or the content of a six-week science lesson? That affects the conversation, and it isn’t always clear.

Michael W. Stetter, Delaware’s accountability chief, said he thinks of curriculum on two levels: the “macro,” or big ideas, in documents such as state standards or frameworks, and the “micro,” or what’s taught in units or marking periods. What sets people off, he said, is talk of managing the micro curriculum.

“What rings alarm bells in people’s minds is this notion of who would be the august body who decides what is worth teaching and what is not,” he said. “It’s worse when discussions about curriculum don’t make clear what it is we are actually talking about.”

Some think the debate is too black and white. Heidi Hayes Jacobs, a Rye, N.Y.-based curriculum consultant, said it is possible to

agree on central ideas for standards and leave schools to teach them their own way. It's a crucial distinction, she said, between guidelines and "operational curriculum."

"What's stirring everything up here is the word 'common,'" she said. "It suggests everything is the same, when people know that curriculum has to be responsive. But we can think of 'common' as more like a town common, a place where we all meet."

### Public Input

For some educators, concerns in the shared-curriculum debate center on a shift away from the traditional curriculum-development process, in which states most often craft standards and broad outlines and leave districts to design classroom-level plans.

With public entities making those decisions, community members typically have a chance to provide input as boards or committees are shaping them. Some worry that "shared curricula"—however high level or close to the classroom—could circumvent public access by cutting out the public's role.

"At what point will all these materials be available for public review? When they're final?" asked Sandra Stotsky, who helped shape Massachusetts' standards and curriculum frameworks when she worked in the state department of education. "The point of a public, civic process is to allow time for public input, feedback, and revision."

Some privately financed efforts to build instructional resources for the common standards are already using an open, iterative process. Curriculum maps created by the Common Core organization in Washington, for instance, are posted on the group's website and are undergoing constant revision as teachers and others examine and react to them, said President Lynne Munson.

"There is a certain unease about curriculum creation because it connects to content, and there have been various wars in recent decades about reading lists and such," said Ms. Munson. "We are trying to navigate those admittedly difficult waters. ... We would be fools to create materials in a process that doesn't draw on the tremendous wisdom of a public-review process."

Leaders of both state assessment consortia—the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC—told Education Week that their array of instructional resources will be available for review, feedback, and revision while they are being written.

Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, a Washington-based group that serves as PARCC's managing partner, noted that the content frameworks, model instructional

units, and other products are being created not by private staff members "in a cubbyhole," but by the states themselves. Joe Willhoft, the executive director of the SBAC, said that consortium's exemplar curriculum units, prototype formative assessments, and other tools will undergo a process of creation, use, feedback, and revision.

### Federal Meddling?

Some in education policy circles have questioned whether the state assessment consortia's plans to produce instructional resources violate restrictions on federal involvement in curriculum.

While federal grants have often supported curriculum development, sections of federal law bar the government from dictating what is taught.

Responding to questions about the use of federal funds for curriculum work, a senior official from the U.S. Department of Education said the department awarded supplemental Race to the Top money to the state consortia to help them transition to the common standards and assessments.

The official noted that the department did not dictate or control how the states planned to make that shift, but accepted the consortia's proposals for doing so. Additionally, department officials said, no state is obligated to use the consortia's materials because the funds are part of a discretionary grant.

*Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).*



Published February 23, 2011, in *Education Week*

# Common-Assessment Consortia Add Resource to Plans

## Extra Federal Funds Will Go Towards Curricula, Teacher Training

By Catherine Gewertz

**T**wo groups of states that are designing assessments for the new set of common academic standards have expanded their plans to provide instructional materials and professional development to help teachers make the transition to the new learning goals.

The common-assessment consortia, which include all but five states, won \$330 million in Race to the Top money last September to design new tests for the common standards. The U.S. Department of Education later awarded an additional \$15.8 million to each consortium, aimed at helping states shift from their current standards and tests to the new ones.

The two groups' plans, finalized in January, show that they intend to wade more deeply into providing curriculum resources and instructional materials to teachers than they proposed in their original grant applications. They also plan to use the funds for professional development on the new standards and test and to help states collaborate on making the policy changes needed for a smooth transition.

"In our original application, we didn't pay a lot of attention to the instructional side. It was pretty clearly an assessment proposal," said Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, a Washington group that is helping manage one of the consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. With its supplemental plan, he said, PARCC hopes to offer a variety of instructional tools, such as sample tasks and model lessons, "without creating the national curriculum no one wants."

### Competition Aplenty

The consortia's new resources will enter an increasingly crowded marketplace of curriculum materials being developed or adapted for the common standards in mathematics and

English/language arts, which have now been adopted by all but seven states.

Among the many organizations working on such products are major publishers, such as Pearson, which recently released middle and high school curricula crafted to reflect the common standards. The American Federation of Teachers is assembling a wide-ranging "toolkit" of resources, such as model lesson plans and videos of teachers teaching particular standards, and will devise a framework to help teachers evaluate how well materials reflect the common standards, said David Sherman, who is working with an AFT task force on implementing the standards.

The union also will support collaborations among its local affiliates, school districts, universities, nonprofit groups, and others to produce or adapt curriculum resources for the new standards, he said.

Also working on a range of instructional materials are a half-dozen organizations that received \$19 million in grants last year from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (*See Education Week, Feb. 24, 2010.*)

Both PARCC and the other consortium, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, envision building digital libraries of resources that would be freely available to educators. They plan some of the same types of tools, but would go about developing them in somewhat different ways.

### 'SMARTER' Blueprint

The SMARTER Balanced group plans to hire two full-time content experts to identify and collaborate with organizations already working on curricular materials for the common standards—such as nonprofit groups, professional organizations, universities, and curriculum developers—and contract with them to "adapt or extend" their products to align with the consortium's vision, the supplemental plan says.

That process would build a range of products for the digital library, including curriculum frameworks, exemplars of curriculum units, and tools to help teachers with formative assessment, the plan says.

"As a multistate consortium, we wanted to make sure that thousands of teachers could

effectively use the \$16 million in support," said Joe Willhoft, the executive director of the SMARTER Balanced group, which has 31 member states.

The library of curriculum materials would provide a "foundation" for professional development for teachers, the group's plan says. The consortium, which has emphasized the involvement of teachers in designing and scoring its new assessments, says in its plan that it will involve nearly 2,800 teachers from across the country in choosing or devising formative-assessment tools for the digital library. Those tools will include exemplar modules that show teachers how to gauge student learning as classroom lessons are being taught and how to adjust instruction accordingly.

SBAC also intends to work with states and professional groups to build teachers' expertise in its assessment system and teach them how to score and analyze student responses to test items. It will create, among other resources, model curriculum and instructional units aligned to the common standards and training modules for teachers to help them focus instruction on the standards, according to the group's plan.

### PARCC's Vision

The PARCC consortium envisions a digital library of instructional and professional-development tools aimed at developing teachers' understanding of the common standards and giving early signals about the types of student performance and teacher instruction required by the assessments, officials say in their plan.

Those tools could include formative activities, model instructional units, and resources to help teachers and principals understand the results of the consortium's "through course" assessment, which produces a summative score by combining scores from the different types of assessments given four times during the school year.

The consortium also will create "college-readiness tools," such as 12th grade courses to bolster the skills of students who fall short of college-readiness cutoffs on the consortium's 11th grade test. The courses are to be mod-

eled after those in a California program designed to gauge and support college readiness. (See *Education Week*, Jan. 26, 2011.)

Most of the work will be completed by groups of school districts, states, private or nonprofit groups, or universities through a competitive-bidding process, Mr. Cohen said.

PARCC's materials won't make up a complete curriculum, but states that wish to craft one could use the units as building blocks, the group says in its plan. PARCC will work with states to write curriculum frameworks and exemplar lesson plans for the common standards.

The consortium intends to use the supplemental funding to involve teachers more than it envisioned when it originally applied for funding. It hopes to build "cadres" of teachers who will be trained in PARCC's assessments, instructional materials, and professional-development tools, and can serve as "ambassadors" for them in their states, its plan says.

Additionally, because PARCC's 25 members include 10 winners of Race to the Top grants, the consortium envisions helping those states coordinate use of that money and PARCC funds to produce a "coherent and complete set of tools from which all states could benefit," the plan says. It also will create early prototypes of its assessments that teachers can pilot as soon as 2010-11, a process that will help teachers learn the PARCC system, and provide feedback to shape development of the final set, Mr. Cohen said.

The influx of new materials presents both opportunities and challenges for teachers as they try to sort through what best reflects the new common standards. Dottie Whitlow, the executive director of math and science for the Atlanta schools, said her district will draw on Georgia curriculum frameworks, sample tasks, and other supports the state offers, and will evaluate emerging new materials as well.

"I've been doing curriculum work for a long time, and it's always a daunting task to figure out what materials to use," she said. "There are all sorts of promises made about alignment. I remind teachers that these are advertisements to some extent. It's up to us to determine whether these materials are a tight alignment, which is what we want, or a correlation."

*Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students to tackle complex issues in fundamentally different ways is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).*

*Published in Education Week, July 13, 2011*

# Experts: Educators Can't Separate Common Core, State Standards

By Catherine Gewertz

*White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.*

States should take advantage of the ways in which new common standards are different from the state standards already in place, leveraging them to provide better learning for students and a path to better practice for teachers, experts urged recently.

Delegations of top curriculum leaders and board of education members from 13 states gathered here last month to brainstorm about implementing the common-core standards, which have been adopted by all but four states, and to hear advice from experts. The meeting was one in a series of regional convenings organized by the National Association of State Boards of Education.

States are grappling with how to turn the new learning goals into good curricula, train tens of thousands of aspiring and in-service teachers to use them, and transition their accountability systems to reflect them.

In carrying that out, states should take the opportunity to break down age-old silos separating standards and curriculum work from policy areas such as professional development, higher education, and human-resources planning, said Susan Tave Zelman, a consultant who served previously as Ohio's state superintendent of education.

"The real power in this work is the power of alignment," said Ms. Zelman.

She warned states that intensive communications outreach is needed to help educators and administrators understand how the common standards are significantly different from previous state standards. The new math standards, for instance, emphasize understanding math concepts and applying them to real-world problems, rather than simply memorizing formulas.

"Make sure to make clear what is different between your current standards and common-core standards, because I'm telling you, out there people don't see the differences," Ms. Zelman said.

The common standards represent such a big change that states shouldn't even try to

find commonalities between them and their old state standards, but view them "as something completely new," said Ken Krehbiel, the associate executive director of communications for the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

## Fresh Perspective

That way, he said, educators are more likely to find fresh ways to design lessons based on the "mathematical practices" that form the core of the standards, emphasizing skills such as problem-solving and mathematical modeling.

NCTM and others are working to build a library of sample tasks that reflect those practices and are making them available to educators as they are assembled, Mr. Krehbiel said.

The same goes for the English/language arts standards; the National Council of Teachers of English is helping teachers through virtual conferences and a new professional-development program, and in the fall will publish a set of guides, customized by grade-level spans, designed to help teachers understand the new standards and plan instruction to reflect them, said Anne R. Gere, NCTE's director of policy research.

The common English/language arts standards, she noted, differ greatly from most existing state standards in placing more emphasis on informational texts, on cross-disciplinary literacy skills, and on building and defending arguments. But they're also structured differently to reflect how students learn, she said.

"Remember, the common-core standards are not about coverage, but spiraling, learning something and taking it to the next level," Ms. Gere told the gathering.

She suggested that states consider creating literacy teams to forge the "huge change" that's necessary and using groups of teachers to help bring it about.

## High Bar for ELLs

States also got advice from experts focused

on English-language learners and students with disabilities.

Rachel Quenemoen, the project director for one of two state consortia designing tests for students with special needs, said advocates for such students still must contend with rampant misconceptions about their learning, which could serve as a barrier to higher achievement under the common standards. She urged the attendees to keep the bar high.

“Specially designed instruction does not mean working at a lower level or weakening the curriculum,” she said. “And there are still many educators who believe both.”

As English-learners try to conquer the expectations in the new standards, it will be especially important to find ways to help them understand academic language, said Margo Gottlieb, the lead developer of common assessments for English-learners for the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium, or WIDA.

To help such students, she said, educators must identify the academic language demands of the common core in resulting curriculum frameworks and provide appropriate instructional supports.

States shared ideas about common-core implementation and its various challenges.

Mary Kay Finan, a state board member from Maryland, told the group that her state had recently begun to require new teachers of all subjects to take courses in the acquisition of reading skills and reading in the content areas. While that doesn't reach teachers already in the field, she acknowledged, it sends a message to new ones that “all teachers are teachers of reading.”

Glenny Lee Buquet, a state board member from Louisiana, raised the question of whether certification grade-spans might have to change to accommodate the common core. Some topics will now be taught at lower grades, she noted, forcing a teacher with a K-3 certification, for instance, to teach topics previously taught in 4th or 5th grade.

In Ohio, the state has created a model curriculum with hundreds of units linked to clusters in the common-core standards, said Sasheen Phillips, the state's interim associate superintendent. It is working on an “eye of integration” tool that will help teachers create interdisciplinary instruction, she said.

*Published in Education Week, July 13, 2011*

# Teacher Training Gets High Priority in Md. Push on Common Standards

By Sean Cavanagh  
*Frostburg, Md.*

**T**eachers and principals from across northwestern Maryland arrived here on buses and in carpools, many of them lugging thick binders containing the common standards adopted by their state and more than 40 others.

Their mission: to make sense of those broad academic expectations in English/language arts and math, figure out how to apply them in their classrooms, and bring those lessons back to their schools this fall.

The educators had gathered late last month for one of 11 “educator effectiveness academies” being staged across Maryland this summer, which officials have billed as the largest professional-development program for teachers ever held in the state. Every public school—1,450 in all—has been asked to send a team of educators to one of the academies, which are being supported with federal Race to the Top money.

Maryland was one of 11 states, plus the District of Columbia, to win an award through the Race to the Top competition, a \$4 billion grant program—backed by the Obama administration and funded by the 2009 economic-stimulus package—that was meant to foster school improvement and innovation.

Along with 44 other states and the District of Columbia, Maryland, which won \$250 million through the competition, agreed to adopt the common standards, a decision that earned it extra points in the scoring for the grants. The standards were developed through the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an effort led by organizations representing the nation's governors and schools chiefs. Since then, two consortia of states have begun crafting common assessments and curricular support to supplement the standards, with \$360 million in Race to the Top money.

States could also earn points in the competition for proposing professional development in areas such as helping schools use data wisely and tailoring such training to needs identified in school employees' evaluations.

Maryland appears to have taken an especially ambitious approach to setting up that training. The scope of its professional development underscores the challenges that the state and others face as they attempt to sell teachers and administrators on complex, and often controversial, policies in their Race to the Top plans, even as many of the details of those policies have yet to be worked out.

## Professional Development

State officials chose to hold the academies at sites across Maryland so that no teacher or principal had to make more than an hour's trip by car, said Scott Pfeifer, the director of instructional assessment and teacher effectiveness for the state department of education. The state expects to spend \$12.5 million of its Race to the Top award on the academies over three years.

Each school is expected to send a team of three teachers and the principal to one of the three-day workshops, the first of which was held June 27-29 here in Frostburg. In addition to fostering school-level educators' understanding of the K-12 standards and how to use them in math and language arts, the state wants their input in the crafting of curriculum frameworks, detailed guides that Maryland officials are now developing that spell out the specific knowledge and skills that students are supposed to acquire, based on the common standards.

The state will continue the academies over the next two summers. The focus will turn to topics such as helping schools' use of formative assessments, typically defined as in-class tests, quizzes, and on-the-spot evaluations meant to help teachers refine and improve lessons in real time. Future academies will also introduce teachers and principals to new statewide tests, based on the common standards, that Maryland is developing in partnership with other states.

The Frostburg academy, held at Mountain Ridge High School, drew about 350 attendees from Maryland's rural counties near the Pennsylvania and West Virginia borders. After an opening session held in the audio-

rium, teachers scattered to individual classrooms to work in small groups in sessions led by “master teachers” who had studied the standards extensively.

## Regional Attendance

One of those teachers who made the trip was Eric VanSlyke, a physics and chemistry teacher from Fort Hill High School in nearby Cumberland. Mr. VanSlyke believes the common standards could bring more consistency to academic expectations across schools and entire regions. Too often, students arrive at his school from other districts and states with skills that don’t match what’s being taught at the school’s grade level, he said.

But he also predicted that schools’ adjustment to the standards would be difficult. Teachers who have labored to put together coherent lessons don’t want those plans upended, he said, and they’re especially wary because they’re used to policymakers’ periodic changes of mind about what they want.

Making the standards work “is not going to be up to someone at the state level,” Mr. VanSlyke said. “It’s going to be up to the teachers.”

His colleague Matthew Marsh, who teaches English, worries that the new standards will de-emphasize a rich study of literature in favor of focusing on students’ ability to interpret nonfiction. Yet he also predicts that the standards will result in students’ arriving in his class with a better set of skills acquired in earlier grades.

“A lot of students seem to have skipped some of the [steps in the] staircase,” he said. The standards “will make the transition into higher-level English much easier for some of these kids.”

On their first day in Frostburg, participants were given an overview of the standards, with teachers from English, math, and other math- and science-related subjects sitting through the same presentations together. The goal was to show the teachers that the standards, with their emphasis on areas such as reading texts closely and thinking critically, can be applied across subjects, said Judy Jenkins, the director of curriculum for the state education department.

On the second and third days, teachers in math and language arts gathered with educators from their subjects for a more in-depth tutorial on the content of the standards.

## Following Up

Research does not point to one particular professional-development model that works in all settings, but the most successful efforts are typically not structured as one-time events, but rather as programs that follow up with participants and help them refine their work, said Laura M. Desimone, an associate professor of public policy and education at the University of Pennsylvania.

That’s especially true when introducing teachers to new standards, which usually take a lot of time to absorb, she said.

The question is whether the training “is going to help teachers build lessons differently,” said Ms. Desimone, who has studied professional development, standards, and instruction. “Teachers need continuous feedback,” she said, “like most professionals.”

Maryland officials say they will provide that support. School teams are required to complete “transition plans” describing how they will make their colleagues comfortable with the standards. The state will randomly audit schools’ use of those plans, Mr. Pfeifer said. In addition, the state plans to hold two online follow-up events, he said, and provide continued support to administrators in implementing the standards.

Other winning Race to the Top states set different goals for professional development in their plans.

New York, for example, pledged to provide professional development to 280,000 teachers and administrators on the common standards, as well as coaching for teachers and administrators on such topics as turning around struggling schools, using data, and providing instruction for Advanced Placement courses.

Delaware gave districts freedom to choose professional-development strategies that fit their academic goals, in areas such as special education and academic content, said Alison Kepner, a spokeswoman for the Delaware education department.

Maryland has also promised to use its Race to the Top money to create a new model for evaluating teachers and administrators based on their ability to raise student test scores and other measures. That process has not been easy, and some teachers have voiced skepticism that they will be judged fairly.

Those worries were evident among some of the educators in Frostburg.

During an opening question-and-answer session, one audience member asked Ms. Jenkins how Maryland could be developing a system for evaluating teachers using student test scores, when the state is still trying to explain its standards to teachers and hasn’t developed the exams that will be based on those standards.

“My job is going to depend on how well my students do, on these nebulous things?” the educator asked. “What’s the plan for that?”

The state official acknowledged that many things were in flux.

“I wish I had an answer for that,” Ms. Jenkins said, drawing chuckles from the crowd. The laughter continued when she quipped: “Can someone ask an easier one?”

*Coverage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is supported in part by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, at [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org).*



Published April 27, 2011, in *Education Week*

# Common Assessments Are a Test for Schools' Technology

Even small details like electrical-circuit capacity could undermine effort

By Catherine Gewertz  
*Washington*

It's a daunting job for two big groups of states to design multilayered assessment systems by 2014, and a panel of experts has made it even more daunting, composing a long list of concerns about what it will take to make the venture a success.

On its list, the panel included high-level, long-range items such as integrating the tests into systems of instruction, and nitty-gritty, immediate worries such as making sure the tests' computer demands don't blow schools' electrical circuits.

The to-do list was sketched out during a six-hour hearing convened April 15 by the U.S. Department of Education. It was the first in a series aimed at advising the two state collaboratives as they design tests for the new common standards in mathematics and English/language arts that have been adopted by all but six states, using \$360 million in federal Race to the Top money. Forty-five states are participating in the assessment consortia.

The meeting focused on the technological challenges states and districts might face in the 2014-15 school year, when the federal government expects the tests to be fully operational. Questions of technological capacity loom, since both consortia plan assessments that are largely computer-based.

Presiding over the hearing, Ann Whalen, a top adviser to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, called the technological questions "sticky." By day's end, the long list of cautions led one panelist to extend his sympathies to the two consortia, each of which was represented by a small battery of technical experts.

"If I were sitting in your shoes right now, I'd be feeling a bit nervous," said Michael Russell, who directs the Nimble Innovation Lab at Measured Progress, a Dover, N.H.-based assessment company. As chuckles rippled around the room, Mr. Russell hur-

ried to add an optimistic spin, expressing confidence that the test-design teams would adjust to the challenges ahead.

"Twenty years from now, we'll look back, and it'll be second nature," he said.

The two consortia plan to work jointly to size up districts' capacity to handle large-scale computer-based testing. They said they would soon issue a joint request for proposals from vendors to design a technology-readiness assessment that would give the consortia a sense of districts' capacity and signal them about what they might need to transition to online testing.

States and districts must soberly assess what's needed to make that shift, since the consortia's "great visions of grandeur" involve not just summative tests, but systems that include interim or formative tools, banks of test items, portals through which test results can be accessed and analyzed, and more, said John Jesse, the assessment director in Utah, which belongs to the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.

The most problematic capacity issues will be at the schools themselves, Mr. Russell said. If an Internet router can't handle 60 or 70 computers at once, for instance, problems could arise if a social studies teacher decides to stream video for her class while large groups of students are taking tests elsewhere in the building, he said.

Experts also warned the SBAC and the other consortium, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, to be cautious about administering tests on multiple kinds of devices. Schools might not be able to be "device agnostic," Mr. Russell said, if a student can't demonstrate achievement as well on a tablet computer as on a desktop computer. It might not be possible to deliver assessments the same way on different devices "without measurement effects," he said.

## Lessons Learned

A trio of officials from Virginia was on hand to share the state's experience, since that state was on the leading edge when it ventured into online assessment in 2000. Sarah Susbury, who oversees test administration, scoring, and reporting, noted that Virginia had six years to phase in its online tests, a luxury the consortia won't have, with

their deadlines only three years away. Virginia did not adopt the common standards or join either assessment consortium.

In moving to online testing, a key lesson for Virginia was that it's impossible to separate assessment and technology, Ms. Susbury said. Experts in both areas must leave their traditional silos and work closely together, she said.

Virginia officials emphasized the importance of having one portal that could serve as the hub for the testing system, from entering and viewing student data to training teachers and posting status updates about problems with the system. Especially during testing windows, it's crucial to have one place for districts to check for problems, since the state education department and its contracted help desk can't answer every phone call, said Shelley Loving-Ryder, Virginia's assistant superintendent for assessment and school improvement.

If that experience is any guide, the consortia should be prepared to do "a lot of hand-holding" in training educators at all levels on the new systems, Ms. Loving-Ryder said. As Virginia prepares to pilot online writing assessments, 5th grade teachers are particularly concerned because they fear 10-year-olds' keyboarding skills could affect test outcomes, she said. The education department is sharing the test interface ahead of time to give teachers time to practice, she said.

## Security Concerns

Online testing also prompts new questions about security of test data, several panelists said. Ms. Susbury warned that "encryption and security are critical" as states endeavor to protect test data. The state learned the hard way that it had to plan for unimagined security emergencies. In the first month of its program, a backhoe doing work on school property during a test severed a key computer line, prompting fear that students' online responses wouldn't be preserved, she recalled.

Mobile devices and "open source" systems pose challenges as well, without adequate attention to security, said Denny Way, a senior research scientist for psychometric and research services at Pearson.

One approach to security for certain kinds of test items, he said, would be to produce

and publicly share a huge number of items. Releasing hundreds of essays in English/language arts, for instance, would make it impossible to prepare for so many essays, making cheating very difficult.

Wes Bruce, Indiana's chief assessment officer, warned against that approach. He said he heard that one district in his state released so many test items—in an apparent bid to help students prepare for the test—that it constituted what he viewed as “a crime against kids.”

Concerns expressed by the experts ranged from the big-picture to the very down-to-earth.

Richard F. Rozzelle, the president of the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology, which helps districts and states manage information technology, urged states to use the new testing systems as an opportunity to build a new “information architecture” that would integrate all pieces of the education spectrum, from curriculum design to management of assessment data.

Virginia officials urged the test-design teams to size up even the most basic forms of capacity at the school level. They recounted how one rural district decided to charge all its wheeled carts of laptop computers overnight, overloading the electrical circuits and shutting off heat in all its buildings.

Stories like that prompted Ken Wagner, the assistant commissioner for data systems and information and reporting services in New York state, to note that the “boring, mundane details” can easily sink an ambitious assessment system. “If we don't start talking about specific details,” he said, “we're going to regret it.”

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Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.  
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100  
Bethesda, MD, 20814  
Phone: (301) 280-3100  
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<http://www.ashankerinst.org/curriculum.html>

Albert Shanker Institute, March 2011

## **Common Core Curriculum Maps**

<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/common%20standards%20map%20june%202013.jpg>

Education Week, June 2011

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## **A Critical Response to the Shanker Institute Manifesto and the U.S. Department of Education's Initiative to Develop a National Curriculum and National Assessments Based on National Standards**

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*David Coleman and Susan Pimentel*

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