



## Now What? Imperatives & Options for “Common Core” Implementation & Governance October 2010

With the release of the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math, as well as the current assessment-development efforts tied to those standards, much of the U.S. is on the way toward shared academic expectations and measures for K-12 education—a remarkable development. Yet a thousand “next steps” must be thought through and implemented if these standards and assessments are to get real traction and yield real benefits for American kids, schools and educators in the years ahead.

With help from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have been considering those steps along with a set of thorny issues that will determine the *long-term* viability of this endeavor. What needs to happen in the next five years? A decade hence, who will be in charge of the common standards-and-testing effort? How will these activities be governed? Paid for? And more.

Below you will find **Paul Lingenfelter’s** response to a dozen perplexing questions on the future of the Common Core initiative. The questions are split into two sections, the first focusing on standards and the second on assessments. Responses from additional education experts, along with Fordham’s own October 2010 synthesis and recommendations (by Chester Finn and Mike Petrilli), *Now What? Imperatives & Options for “Common Core” Implementation & Governance*, can be found online at [http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news\\_now-what-imperatives-and-options-for-common-core-implementation-and-governance](http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_now-what-imperatives-and-options-for-common-core-implementation-and-governance).

*(Questionnaires and responses are from June 2010. Some references may be out-dated.)*

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### **Paul Lingenfelter**

President, State Higher Education Executive Officers

**(A full response follows question 12)**

#### **Governance of the Common Core State Standards**

- 1) Who should oversee the ongoing development and revision of the Common Core State Standards over, say, the next twenty years?
  - Does something new need to be created or can existing organizations or structures handle it?

- What's the argument for/against turning this whole thing over to NAGB to run (in addition to NAEP)?
  - What about letting the ad hoc coalition that got us this far (led by NGA and CCSSO) continue to lead the process?
  - How urgent is this? Could the "Common Core" initiative proceed for a time with *no* governance per se, then reconvene the original partners to take stock and determine next steps?
- 2) If it's a new governing body, how should it be constituted? What should be its governance? Members? Selected by whom? Should it include (for example) governors? State chiefs? Legislators? Superintendents of major districts? Teachers? Subject matter experts? Who else?
    - Since most people believe it's important to maintain state ownership/leadership of the CCSSI venture going forward, what are the best ways of ensuring this?
    - Does it need to be a formal entity or could it be a looser confederation or network?
  - 3) How, if at all, should *higher education* be involved in the governance of K-12 standards (and assessments)? How about *employers*? Particularly considering that meeting these standards and passing these assessments should signify "college and career readiness"?
  - 4) How can the governing body be constituted to increase the likelihood that it will maintain rigor in the face of political push-back? In other words, how to protect the common standards from getting dumbed-down over time? Is there a role here for something like the "validation committee" that participated in the initial CCSSI process?
  - 5) What roles, if any, should the governing body of the CCSSI initiative play beyond overseeing the ongoing development and revision of the standards? Should it undertake research to determine their validity? Their effectiveness? The fidelity of state and local implementation? How participating states handle the "additional 15 %"? Should it undertake any implementation activities itself? Developing curriculum, for example? Monitoring curricular alignment with the standards? Designing instructional materials? Developing professional development modules? Others? If the CCSSI governing body doesn't oversee these activities, who should (particularly if any of this is to be done in a "common" way)?
  - 6) How should this be paid for going forward? If not by the federal government, then by whom? If by states, how would that work? If by the federal government, what should be the relationship of the government to the common standards' governing body?
  - 7) What other comments or suggestions do you have that might be considered for the long-term governance of the common standards?

#### **Governance of the Common Core State Assessments**

- 8) What are the governance implications of finding ourselves with more than one set of assessments aligned to the common standards? Will each successful "consortium" simply govern itself over the long haul? What should those governing bodies look like? How, if at all, should they relate to the governing body of the Common Core *standards*?

- 9) What roles should the assessment consortia play, beyond developing and updating the test specifications? Administering the tests over the long run? Ensuring test security? Setting guidelines for participation of special education students and English language learners? Setting “cut scores”? Publishing school-by-school results? Rating schools based on the results? Others? If the assessment consortia don’t oversee these activities, who should (particularly if any of this is to be done in a “common” way)?
- 10) If it turns out that only one assessment consortium wins the “Race to the Test” competition—or that states eventually opt for a single new assessment system—should its governing body be merged with that of the common standards? Why or why not?
- 11) How should the assessments be paid for going forward? If not by the federal government, then by whom? If by states, how would that work? If by the federal government, what should be its relationship to the assessment consortia?
- 12) What other comments or suggestions do you have that might be considered for the governance of the common assessments?



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July 5, 2010

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Dear Checker and colleagues:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your questions about the future governance of the Common Core State Standards and the Common Core State Assessments. The accompanying papers are very useful, and your questions are both thoughtful and thought provoking.

I applaud the effort to generate dialogue on questions of implementation and governance, but many of these questions seem premature to me at this stage of the development of the Common Core Standards. My comments below will address some of your questions, directly or indirectly, but mostly I

have more questions. With apologies for not following guidelines more faithfully, let me offer some observations and additional questions.

In July 2009, the Executive Committee of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) expressed strong support for the Common Core Standards Initiative. This was based on a belief that shared K-12 goals and expectations for student learning will help students, enabled by good teachers, do what is necessary to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for success in the global economy. The Committee's support is based on a conviction that math and English language arts are foundational for all learning. It also reflects a conviction that standards in math and English must be supported by a system of high quality assessments *and* a rigorous curriculum, both in math and English and *also* in the broader range of subjects required for postsecondary education, economic self-sufficiency, and responsible citizenship. For nearly every student these subjects should include science, history and social studies, arts, and languages.

Speaking now more for myself, let me comment on the contributions of the Common Core Standards Initiative and the opportunities they create. First, the new standards for English language arts and mathematics make more visible and explicit the nation's largely implicit consensus around standards for learning in these core areas. This should have the effect of sharpening and clarifying our expectations for teaching and learning, and reducing confusion about attainment. Students (and their teachers) need to know where they stand and what they need to learn.

Second, in part due to their clarity and consistency across states, the new standards can provide the basis for real progress towards the goal of making all or nearly all high school graduates capable of college-level work and success in the workforce. Obviously, standards alone cannot do this, but standards can help move and shape other parts of our education system, including the curriculum, teaching techniques, and the assessments to monitor and certify learning achievement.

To support these primary purposes, I suggest the need to add one more presumption to the three that precede your list of questions:

- ***In order to achieve broad adoption of standards with appropriate content and essential rigor, and in order to achieve their potential benefits for students, higher education faculty and academic leaders must be deeply involved in setting standards, developing assessments, and incorporating into practice these standards and assessments.***

Without extensive and deep postsecondary education involvement, more uniform and transparent high school graduation requirements could still fall short of broadly held expectations for college and workforce readiness. Higher education involvement will also be essential for realizing the second goal of clear and continuous improvement.

That said, the approval of educators will not be sufficient. Both K-12 and postsecondary educators must realize that the demands of the external world—not the practices and propensities of educators—are driving the need for improvement. External anchoring and validation of standards will be needed,

beginning but not ending with the need to prepare students for college-level work. Civic and business leaders should have a voice in this conversation.

It may not surprise you that, to my ear, many of the questions posed have a regulatory tone and implications not easily harmonized with higher education practices and beliefs in the United States. College and university faculty strongly value their independence, and almost reflexively resist external pressures for conformity.

But college and university faculty *have* standards, and in most, perhaps all important respects, I believe they fundamentally share *common* standards for foundational knowledge and skill in mathematics and English. The comments of postsecondary faculty who reviewed drafts of the Common Core Standards make evident this working consensus. Moreover, many in higher education believe we need to establish greater clarity the wide variety of postsecondary learning objectives and assessments; the Common Core Standards initiative will help us make progress toward that goal.

But as we move forward in the implementation of Common Core Standards, perhaps all of us would benefit from openly exploring the questions: 1) What needs to be standardized? and 2) Where, around a “common core,” might some variation in approach and competition to find better assessments or new dimensions of learning be helpful.

While your questions on governance are thoughtful and thought-provoking, it will be easier to answer them after we have more time to establish widespread acceptance and stability of the standards themselves. Once there is a working consensus on the core, we may learn that variation around the edges is not harmful, and could even be helpful.

I suspect that in many cases “good enough” answers will emerge within the next several years, as the standards become accepted and established in leading states and others. I also believe that the much will be learned by and from the several consortia of states soon to be working on the development of new approaches to student assessment. Certainly the advantages of federal- state collaboration and partnerships are already apparent as a better approach than top-down federal government direction and mandates, on the one hand, and the chaos of entirely uncoordinated expressions of state autonomy and local control, on the other.

Where “good enough” does not emerge easily, a way must be found to reframe the questions, broaden the conversation, and draw out what we must collectively learn in order to come up with workable arrangements for roles and tasks that are essentially new in American education.

With this as prologue, let me pose some additional questions that seem important to this conversation.

- 1) What are the odds that the assessment consortia now being formed will provide creative answers (and perhaps more than one acceptable answer) to many of the questions you have posed? Is there danger in pushing to decisions about “governance” before we have a clear notion of what we are about to learn and create?

- 2) Given the presumption that the principal purpose for Common Core Standards is to improve performance, what are the implications for assessments? What should be the balance between diagnostic, summative, and formative roles for assessment instruments? Can single instruments serve all these purposes?
- 3) Student performance will vary, no matter how clear the standards and their assessments, no matter how effective the curriculum and teaching. How high should the stakes be when performance falls short of the standard? How will assessments and our use of assessments take into consideration variability in performance?

Focusing on postsecondary education, it is difficult to imagine that the more selective colleges and universities will not continue to establish “above standard” performance as a criterion for admission; moreover, different standards are likely for different academic programs. It is also likely that many students, falling modestly short of the standards will be graduated from high school and admitted into a college in order to learn the knowledge and skills they have not yet achieved. Some suggest tolerating variable performance is inconsistent with the philosophy of standards, but the evidence suggests that without an acceptable means of working with variable performance, rigorous, meaningful standards cannot be sustained. Assessments measuring college readiness have implications for admission requirements, placement, accreditation, “ability to benefit,” and other postsecondary education academic policies. How will we cope with “readiness” as a continuous, not a categorical variable?

- 4) Can we develop assessments that allow for, and provide positive credit for creativity and imagination? How might they function in the context of standards for knowledge and skill?
- 5) What are the implications of new assessments for existing tools used to measure college and career readiness? ( ACT, SAT, Accuplacer, et al.) Educational assessment has been a competitive business in the United States for at least half a century, and it is difficult to imagine all the talent and capital held by competing companies can or will be merged into or replaced by a single entity. Nor is a single source of assessments likely to be good for education. Might it be possible, however, for psychometric companies to collaborate on developing a single assessment of the “common core,” and then compete on other aspects of the business – delivery of ancillary services, diagnostic and developmental tools, assessments outside the “common core” in science, social studies, etc. ? (Parenthetically, I think the benefits of common standards beyond mathematics and English language arts are doubtful, and the difficulties of developing them are certain. Diversity and competing ideas in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities are inevitable and desirable.)
- 6) Can governance of Common Core Standards be separated from governance of Common State Assessments? Do Common Standards require absolutely uniform assessments?

These questions and hesitancy about moving quickly to resolve governance questions should not be interpreted to imply any reservations about the Common Core Standards in mathematics and English language arts; they are a very important step forward for education in the United States.

As we bend our minds and good will to the task, I have no doubt that our nation of learners, inventors and doers will resolve these questions, widely adopt, and make good use of better education standards.

Thanks again for asking me to develop and share some thoughts on these issues. My staff colleagues and I have enjoyed the effort.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul E. Lingenfelter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Paul" being the most prominent.

Paul E. Lingenfelter  
President

Embargoed until October 19, 2010