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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Common Core State Standards

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have ardent supporters and strong critics.¹ The actual effect of the CCSS, however, will depend much less on the standards themselves than on how they are used. Two factors are particularly crucial. The first is whether states invest in the necessary curricular and instructional resources and supports, and the second concerns the nature and use of CCSS assessments developed by the two national testing consortia.

The movement toward nationwide curriculum standards began in 2009 and has been led by the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, accompanied by the Gates Foundation's fiscal support. The CCSS goal is to assure a high-level "internationally competitive" set of standards, help teachers organize their lessons, and assure educational continuity for mobile students.² A claimed advantage is that an economy of scale is created (particularly for corporations supplying professional development, instructional materials, and standardized testing).³ Another claimed benefit is the facilitation of comparisons among states, although such information is already provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Since the CCSS has not been implemented, many questions cannot be definitively answered. Yet, there are informative lessons from related research. There is, for example,

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no evidence that states within the U.S. score higher or lower on the NAEP based on the rigor of their state standards.⁴ Similarly, international test data show no pronounced test-score advantage on the basis of the presence or absence of national standards.⁵ Further, the wave of high-stakes testing associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has resulted in the “dumbing down” and narrowing of the curriculum.⁶

Owing to the historically limited educational role of the federal government, those behind the CCSS have taken care to avoid having the effort characterized as “national standards” or a “national curriculum.”⁷ Four states (Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia) have, as of October of 2012, declined to participate, and Minnesota has agreed to adopt CCSS in only one subject area. (Five currently participating states are considering legislation to slow down implementation⁸). But that refusal has come at a cost. For a state to be eligible for federal Race to the Top or NCLB waivers, for example, it must adopt “college and career ready standards.”⁹ Nevertheless, in many minds, curriculum and standards are a state responsibility, and the CCSS represents federal over-reach.¹⁰

Since the 1994 passage of the *Goals 2000* legislation, state standards have been increasingly linked to large-scale assessments of those standards. With NCLB, high-stakes consequences were attached to the test scores. As a predictable consequence, the assessments have driven curriculum and instruction much more than the state standards themselves. It is now again predictable that the nature and use of the CCSS assessments will largely determine the impact of CCSS. Two national assessment consortia (the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) are developing computer-based testing for a scheduled implementation in 2014-15.¹¹ Among the unresolved issues are:

- 1) the amount and impact of testing time required for the new assessments;
- 2) whether the results have enough validity and precision to justify high-stakes applications currently being eyed by lawmakers (e.g., evaluation of principals and teachers);
- 3) the ability of the two consortia to sustain the effort given the current fiscal needs and available resources;
- 4) whether the assessment systems will be ready on time; and
- 5) most important, whether the tests will create incentives for teaching a rich, engaging, comprehensive curriculum.¹²

A paramount issue is whether, given the current status of federal and state budgets, there will be the political will to provide schools and students the professional support and learning resources necessary for the effort to be successful.

As the absence or presence of rigorous or national standards says nothing about equity, educational quality, or the provision of adequate educational services, there is no reason to expect CCSS or any other standards initiative to be an effective educational reform *by itself*.¹³

Key Research Points and Advice for Policymakers

- The adoption of a set of standards and assessments, by themselves, is unlikely to improve learning, increase test scores, or close the achievement gap.¹⁴
- For schools and districts with weak or non-existent curriculum articulation, the CCSS may adequately serve as a basic curriculum.¹⁵
- The assessment consortia are currently focused on mathematics and English/language arts. Schools, districts, and states must take proactive steps to protect other vital purposes of education such as citizenship, the arts, and maximizing individual talents – as well as the sciences and social sciences. As test-based penalties have increased, the instructional attention given to non-tested areas has decreased.¹⁶
- Educators and policymakers need to be aware of the significant costs in instructional materials, training and computerized testing platforms the CCSS requires.¹⁷ It is unlikely the federal or state governments will adequately cover these costs. For the CCSS to be meaningful depends directly on whether it is adequately supported.
- The nation’s “international economic competitiveness” is unlikely to be affected by the presence or absence of national standards.¹⁸
- Children learn when they are provided with high-quality and equitable educational opportunities. Investing in ways that enhance these opportunities shows the greater promise for addressing the nation’s education problems.

Notes and References

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