OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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OLR BACKGROUNDER: COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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This report explains the origins of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), including their (1) conception, (2) writing process, (3) design elements, (4) state adoption initiative, (5) plans for subject area expansion, and (6) currently debated issues.

OVERVIEW

The CCSS are subject-based standards designed to prepare students in grades kindergarten through 12 (K-12) for higher education and the workplace. According to the mission statement on the CCSS website, "[t]he standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers."

The standards are not a curriculum or test questions, but rather descriptive lists, organized by grade and subject matter, of specific skill areas and subject matter content that teachers must help their students master. Teachers and school districts must use the standards to design their own curriculum. Currently, English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics are the only subject areas for which standards are available, but there are other subject areas being developed.

As of the publication of this report, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have adopted the CCSS. The Connecticut State Board of Education (SBE) adopted the CCSS on July 7, 2010, and Connecticut public school districts have already begun implementing them.

Many questions have surfaced about the CCSS as Connecticut and most other states guide school districts toward fully implementing them by the 2014-15 school year. (Kentucky and New York have already fully implemented the new standards.) Since education policy in the United States is traditionally determined on a state and local level, the nationwide nature of the CCSS is unique.

This report provides a look at the origins of the CCSS initiative and a snapshot of future plans for the standards. It ends with a representation of comments from both supporters and critics of the initiative.

CCSS CONCEPTION

The CCSS, first published in 2010, are sponsored jointly by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and were conceived through their partnership with the education policy nonprofit Achieve and its American Diploma Project (ADP).

The Obama administration, U.S. Department of Education (DOE), and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have publically supported the CCSS. The federal government did not participate in the CCSS conception or mandate that states adopt them. However, it promoted them by incentivizing state adoption of college- and career-ready standards and funding the standardized testing consortia aligned to the CCSS (see below).

National Governors Association (NGA)

NGA is the major bipartisan organization of governors. Its goal is to promote visionary state leadership, share best practices, and speak with a collective voice on national policy. NGA's Center for Best Practices helps to accomplish these goals as a research and development division that serves governors in education policy, as well as several other policy areas. Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy is the chair of NGA's 2012-13 Education and Workforce Committee.

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

CCSSO is a nonpartisan, nationwide nonprofit association of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. It provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major education issues. Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) Commissioner Stefan Pryor is a CCSSO member, as were previous SDE commissioners.

Achieve and the American Diploma Project (ADP)

Achieve is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization founded by governors and business leaders at the 1996 National Education Summit. According to its website, its goal is to help states raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability to prepare students for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship.

In 2009, Achieve partnered with NGA and CCSSO to begin managing the development of the CCSS. This partnership sprang from Achieve's high-profile reports that identified a "common core of English and mathematics benchmarks" that high school students need for college and workforce success (*Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts* (2004); *Out of Many, One: Toward Rigorous Common Core Standards from the Ground Up* (2008)). These reports were created as part of Achieve's American Diploma Project (ADP) and Network. ADP aimed to align high school graduation requirements with entry requirements for colleges and work-based training programs. The ADP Network agreed to work with NGA and CCSSO to develop K-12 standards in English and mathematics that are "internationally-benchmarked; college- and career-ready; rigorous; clear and focused; and grounded in research."

In 2009, NGA and CCSSO invited state leaders to participate in an effort to develop common standards in ELA and mathematics. The state leaders who agreed to participate (all but Alaska and Texas) also agreed to adopt these future standards in their entirety to establish comparability between states. The agreement also left room for each state to add 15% locally developed standards. Participating states would retain their own state standards in all other subject areas (i.e., arts, foreign languages, health and physical education, science, social studies, and technology).

WRITING THE STANDARDS

Process

The CCSS were written in two phases. First, a working group drew up standards for college and career readiness, which represented the knowledge and skills that students should obtain by the end of their K-12 career. Then, based on those standards, a separate working group developed standards for each grade level that would lead to reaching those end-of-high school expectations. A July 1, 2009 NGA press release offers a complete list of ELA and mathematics working group membership. The working groups largely consisted of people from Achieve; The College Board; ACT, Inc.; and Student Achievement Partners. Achieve states on its website that a number of its staff and consultants served on the writing teams.

NGA and CCSSO are the primary publishers, copyright holders, and endorsers of the CCSS. While they did not draft the standards, their leadership was the primary force driving the standards' creation.

The CCSS website also states that "teachers, parents, school administrators, and experts from across the country together with state leaders provided input into the development of the standards." The website states that teachers' unions and other organizations brought together teachers to provide specific, constructive feedback on the standards.

However, the news media has given individual authors prominent recognition for their contributions, namely David Coleman and his founding partners at Student Achievement Partners.

David Coleman and Student Achievement Partners

Frequently referred to in the media as the "architect" of the CCSS, David Coleman and his former founding partners at the nonprofit organization Student Achievement Partners played a leading role in writing the standards. Named to the 2013 *Time* 100 Most Influential People in the World, Coleman has been credited with writing the ELA standards. As reported in October 2012 by *The Atlantic*, "Coleman was a lead architect of the Common Core standards, which emphasize canonical literature . . . and serious nonfiction texts across all subjects. He has spent the past year traveling from state to state, showing English teachers how to lead a close reading of great literature." Coleman's Student Achievement Partners co-founders also have been cited as prominent authors, and are listed on the NGA working group list: Jason Zimba (mathematics) and Susan Pimentel (ELA).

According to its webpage, Student Achievement Partners offers open-source (i.e., free and public) materials to states, districts, schools, and teachers to use in implementing college and career readiness standards. The nonprofit does not compete for federal, state, or district contracts, nor does it accept money from educational publishers, according to website disclaimers.

Zimba and Pimentel remain at the organization to date. Coleman has since left Student Achievement Partners; he was appointed president of The College Board in 2012, which oversees the Advance Placement (AP) program and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), among others.

Feedback and Validation

The working groups solicited input from state officials and teachers and released drafts for public comment. A summary of public comment on the standards can be found here and here.

Then, a 25-member validation committee (VC), composed of leading figures in the education standards community, provided an independent validation of the design process. Specifically, the VC examined the standards for (1) evidence of college- and career-ready knowledge and skills, (2) clarity and specificity, (3) comparability with other leading countries' expectations, and (4) grounding in available evidence and research. The NGA and CCSSO released a report in June 2010 describing the VC's process and findings.

CCSS DESIGN ELEMENTS

The CCSS include ELA and Mathematics standards for each grade, kindergarten through eight, and, in order to allow flexibility in high school course design, two-year bands for grades nine through 12 (i.e., one set of standards covers grades nine and 10 and another set covers grades 11 and 12).

Guiding criteria for CCSS ELA and mathematics design included the following elements:

1. Rigorous: include high-level cognitive demands, including reasoning, justification, synthesis, analysis, and problem solving.

2. Clear and specific: provide sufficient detail to convey the level of performance expected without being overly prescriptive.

3. Teachable and learnable: provide sufficient guidance for the design of curricula and instructional materials.

4. Measurable: allow student attainment of standards to be observable and verifiable.

5. Coherent: convey a unified vision of big idea and supporting concepts within a discipline and reflect a meaningful, appropriate learning progression.

6. Grade-by-grade: have limited repetition across the grades to help educators align instruction to the standards.

7. Internationally benchmarked: consider the content, rigor, and organization of high-performing countries' standards.

ELA

The CCSS ELA standards require students to be able to read and comprehend complex texts so they can understand the books and documents they will read in college and the workplace. They also call for a substantial increase in nonfiction reading and writing across the grades, to reflect the expectations of postsecondary institutions, and an emphasis on the use of evidence from texts in writing, rather than personal reflections. They also set expectations for literacy in science, social studies, and technical subjects.

Key areas of the CCSS ELA standards include:

1. reading (text complexity and the growth of comprehension);

2. writing (text types, responding to text, and research);

3. speaking and listening (flexible communication and collaboration); and

4. language (conventions, effective use, and vocabulary).

Mathematics

The mathematics standards include fewer topics than many state standards. CCSS standards require teachers to take an in-depth approach to the most important topics. The standards also require that students develop procedural fluency and conceptual understanding and learn to apply their knowledge to solve real-world problems.

Key areas of the CCSS mathematics standards, as appropriate for the specific grade, include:

1. number and quantity,

2. algebra,

3. functions,

4. modeling,

5. geometry, and

6. statistics and probability.

STATE ADOPTION INITIATIVE

Federal initiatives over the last four years have offered states incentives to adopt new academic standards. In most instances, state legislatures did not adopt the CCSS; rather, state agencies and agency leaders responsible for curriculum most frequently did. In Connecticut, for example, the SBE unanimously adopted the CCSS as the state standards on July 7, 2010.

Federal Incentives

Although the federal government did not help design the CCSS, it offered Race to the Top (RTTT) grant money and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers as incentives to states to adopt "college- and career-ready standards."

RTTT Grants. The DOE's competitive RTTT grants incentivized states to adopt the CCSS. To be eligible for RTTT grants, states had to adopt "internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the work place." This meant that states had to adopt the CCSS or similar career- and college-readiness standards. These grants, which provided $4.3 billion to states, were announced by President Obama and Secretary Duncan on July 24, 2009. States needed to apply by August 2, 2010.

The competition for these grants provided a push for states to adopt the CCSS. The states that chose to adopt the CCSS all did so within two years following this federal grant announcement.

NCLB Waiver Conditions. In deciding whether to grant states NCLB waivers, the DOE did not require states to adopt the CCSS, but they did require states to have college-and career-ready standards in place. Adoption of the CCSS met that requirement, but if states chose not to adopt them, they could submit certification from an institution of higher education to demonstrate that their state's standards reflected college readiness.

State Adoption Status

As of the publication date of this report, 45 states (including Connecticut) and the District of Columbia have adopted the CCSS, with some variations. In most states, laws delegate to state boards of education the authority to establish or adopt academic standards for statewide K-12 public education. In five states, however, the legislature grants final approval of academic standards. Table 1 provides a state-by-state snapshot of the government entities that adopted the CCSS.

Table 1: Government Entity that Adopted the CCSS

Board of Education (or comparable state agency)		Chief State Education Officer (or similar state entity)	Legislative Approval Required
Alabama	Missouri	New Mexico North Dakota Wisconsin	• Idaho (State Senate Education Committee approved Board of Education decision to adopt)
Arizona	Montana		
Arkansas	Nevada		
California	New Hampshire		
Colorado	New Jersey		• Minnesota (Commissioner of Education through statutory authorization)
Connecticut	New York		
Delaware	North Carolina		
District of Columbia	Ohio		
Florida	Oklahoma		
Georgia	Oregon		• Kentucky (General Assembly)
Hawaii	Pennsylvania		
Illinois	Rhode Island		
Indiana	South Carolina		• Maine (State Legislature approved Department of Education proposal to adopt)
Iowa	South Dakota		
Kansas	Tennessee		
Louisiana	Utah		
Maryland	Vermont		
Massachusetts	West Virginia		• Washington (State Superintendent through authorization from State Legislature)
Michigan	Wyoming		
Mississippi			

Source: *National Conference of State Legislatures; Common Core Standards: Frequently Asked Questions, Spring 2012 (Updated September 2012)*

At least 12 states that adopted the CCSS have had bills introduced in their legislatures to suspend or prohibit implementation. One of these states, Indiana, passed a law pausing CCSS implementation pending further study and public hearings. Another, Michigan, passed a provision in its omnibus budget bill prohibiting its Department of Education from funding CCSS implementation.

OTHER SUBJECT AREAS

History / Civics Standards

Currently, the CCSS do not contain a distinct set of standards to guide history or civics curriculum. Instead, the CCSS fold history into the ELA standards. Officially named "English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects," the ELA standards integrate the study of nonfiction into the ELA subject area.

Lynne Munson, President and Executive Director of Common Core, explains that the CCSS ELA standards contain history/social studies literacy standards specific to grades 6-12. The ELA list of recommended texts includes "the Preamble to the Constitution, Gettysburg Address, Letter from Birmingham Jail, and *Common Sense*, along with numerous other key works."

Future Subject Areas

While there are initiatives underway to expand the CCSS to include additional subject areas, NGA and CCSSO are not participating in this process. Table 2 lists the organizations assisting with national standards development for these additional subject areas.

Table 2: Development Initiatives for National Standards in Other Subjects

Subject	Standards Initiative Leader	Standards Initiative Assistants	Website
Science	• Achieve	• National Research Council • National Science Teachers Association • American Association for the Advancement of Science	Next Generation Science Standards: http://www.nextgenscience.org/
World Languages	• American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages	N/A	Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the ELA CCSS: http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Aligning_CCSS_Language_Standards_v6.pdf
Arts	• National Coalition for Core Arts Standards	N/A	2014 National Core Arts Standards: http://www.arteducators.org/research/nccas

DEBATED ISSUES

Federal Versus State and Local Control

A question in the current CCSS debate is whether the adoption of national standards is akin to a federally mandated curriculum. In the United States, public education curriculum decisions have exclusively been determined by states and local boards of education, so federal endorsements of nationwide standards can invite scrutiny.

CCSS proponents point out that the standards were voluntarily developed and adopted by states, not the federal government. Also, they highlight potential benefits to the standards' nearly-national nature. For example, the standards' cross-state compatibility could serve as a common metric for easy student achievement comparisons between schools, districts, and states. Also, the standards are portable: students and parents could have common expectations in the classroom regardless of enrollment location or in the event of a move to a new district or state.

Conversely, CCSS critics point to three actions by the DOE as evidence of the federal government's shepherding of states toward a national curriculum:

1. including state adoption and implementation of "college- and career-ready standards" as a weighted criterion for determining which states would win RTTT funding;

2. heavily weighting state adoption of college- and career-ready standards in considering whether to grant NCLB waivers; and

3. funding close to 99% of the two testing consortia (see "mastery testing" below) that developed computer-based, CCSS-aligned assessments that are expected to be used in all CCSS states.

Adequacy and Appropriateness

There is also debate surrounding the standards' adequacy and appropriateness. Many states consider the CCSS to be at least as rigorous, if not more so, than their current standards. Based on a comparison study conducted in May 2010, the Connecticut SDE determined that 80% of the ELA and 92% of the Mathematics CCSS match Connecticut's current standards in those areas.

However, CCSS critics point out that the standards have not been piloted in any way to test their appropriateness for the respective grade levels. They feel research and field testing is needed to determine if the standards are age-appropriate and truly produce college- and career-ready students.

Critics also wonder if CCSS implementation may have unforeseen or unintended policy consequences. This may be of special concern during the transition to the new standards. For example, a student beginning the 12th grade in 2014-15, the target date for full CCSS implementation, may be a year behind in the new mathematics standards because his or her 11th grade mathematics courses were not yet aligned to the CCSS. Furthermore, if the new standards result in a drop in grades, it may disproportionately affect high school students when they are applying to college.

Mastery Testing

Another contested topic is the use of computer-based mastery tests to assess student progress under the standards. Some believe that tests are necessary to provide teachers with information about each student's growth toward meeting the standards. Others question the tests' design, usefulness, and frequency.

The DOE has supported the testing movement by creating a grant program to develop new assessments to measure student performance against the CCSS. In September 2010, the DOE awarded a total of $330 million to two consortia of states that are developing new, computerized assessment systems assigned to the standards. The consortia are Smarter Balanced (of which Connecticut is a member) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). All but one of the states that have adopted the CCSS are members of one of these consortia.

The assessments are expected to be in place for the 2014-15 school year. Member states govern the two assessment consortia, and the federal government has no say or approval over the structure or content of the assessments.

Cost

There is also concern about the cost to states and local districts of implementing the CCSS and the accompanying assessments. A number of undetermined factors will influence state costs:

1. districts may need to purchase new standards-aligned textbooks and instructional materials;

2. professional development initiatives for teachers will need to be adjusted;

3. schools with dated or sparse computer inventory will face higher upfront costs, but may have fewer future operating costs due to a newly purchased inventory; and

4. states' technological infrastructure may need to be updated.

Additionally, the computer-based mastery testing delivered by the Smarter Balanced and PARCC consortia present a cost to states. Smarter Balanced offers two cost options. One, which includes only summative tests that are given during the last quarter of the school year, costs $22.50 per student. The other, which includes summative tests as well as interim and formative tests given earlier in the school year, costs $27.30 per student. Smarter Balanced claims that its pricing estimates are less expensive than what two-thirds of its member states already spend on student testing. In comparison, PARCC estimates that its summative tests will cost $29.50 per student, which is the only price option available. This cost exceeds what more than half of its member states currently pay.

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