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Governors, Educators Propose National Standards

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A bipartisan governors group, in conjunction with a nonprofit organization of public officials and educators, announced a draft proposal Wednesday of new common-core national education standards for the English language arts and mathematics.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was developed "in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts" to improve skills and "provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce," according to an announcement on the CCSSI Web site www.corestandards.org.

The state-led effort was coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The NGA is a "collective voice" public policy group of state governors; the CCSSO consists of "public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education" and "provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues," according to their respective Web sites.

CCSSI, incorporating K-12 grade level as well as college and career-readiness standards for students, focuses on "high-level cognitive" skills in English and mathematics by "asking students to demonstrate deep conceptual understanding" of the material. The report does not spell out specific procedures for achieving these goals, but instead proposes a general framework.

The common-core standards also suggest "appropriate instructional support" and "aligned assessments" for students who are "English language learners (ELLs)," as well as adjustments for students with disabilities.

Criteria for the core standards was specified as "aligned with college and work expectations," and "internationally benchmarked" to help students succeed "in our global economy and society."

The proposal is seen as an effort to provide uniform public education standards from state to state. Public comment on CCSSI will be accepted through April 2.

Resistance

Amidst the call for federal (and even international) standards for public education—including the Obama administration's recent call for re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—there is some dissent.

The federal 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law allowed states to set the bar for testing standards at the state level. Often federal testing revealed that some states had set the bar too low, and did not show projected improvements compared to pre-NCLB data.

Schools that failed to meet these standards faced heavy penalties or even closures, and political influence from educators and lobbyists was suspected as a factor in establishing lower state standards.

The centralization and increased federal authority over education could open the door to further influence by teachers unions and education groups in establishing lower performance requirements to meet national standards.

"It appears that the route to successful education goes in the opposite direction of national standards; it goes toward universal school choice," says Neal McCluskey, assistant director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. "Only a free market can produce the mix of high standards, accountability, and flexibility that is essential to achieving optimal educational outcomes."

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