



YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:

CORE NATIONAL STANDARDS, ASSESSMENTS: LEADERSHIP AND VISION

By Paul Kimmelman, Ed.D., Learning Point Associates

Despite the ongoing, contentious debate regarding whether there should be national standards, the simple fact is that for something as complex as 21st century public education in the United States, there is a need for some semblance of standardization to avoid chaos. One can look to the business sector for an example. VHS won out over Beta in the videotape battles, but now Blu-ray is the accepted format for DVDs. Without standardization, consumers were left with difficult choices regarding what equipment and what type of media to purchase. In the airline industry, Southwest Airlines always has been considered a well-run, successful airline. One reason is that Southwest standardized its equipment and did not have to inventory parts for many different planes. Finally, educators often are told to look to the health industry for how research should inform practice. Think about what would happen in health care if every state had a different set of procedures for packaging prescription drugs or training surgeons. It is intuitive that voluntary, not federal, core academic standards be written to help guide states on what would best serve students and teachers in this highly competitive 21st century for learning.

Beth Ratway, in the feature article of this newsletter, provides an excellent description of the importance of state standards and assessments with a model using the construction of a house as a metaphor. Thinking about the construction of a house for the collaborative efforts of national, state, and local entities provides a vivid mental model for the work. Mental models are important when leading and imparting a vision for achieving challenging goals that require passionate followers. For states to successfully implement common core standards and assess the performance of their students on these standards, it will be critically important for all educators to consider themselves leaders.

In the recent highly acclaimed Hollywood movie *Invictus*, the story about how Nelson Mandela led a national movement to support the South African rugby team, he engages the team captain, Francois Pienaar, in a highly provocative discussion about leadership. The two questions Mandela asks Pienaar are the perfect metaphor for thinking about common core state standards and an assessment process for them. Mandela asks Pienaar, "How do we inspire ourselves to greatness when nothing else will do, and how do we inspire everyone around us?" Both questions were asked in the context of doing what was perceived as the impossible.

Common core state standards and the willingness to assess how students are doing to achieve proficiency on them is at the crux of taking a giant step for real 21st century school reform. However, the notion of common core standards, particularly at the national level, rubs against the grain of what our founding fathers set forth for education. Clearly, their failure to mention education in the United States Constitution serves as the underpinning for the contentious debate about whether there should be national standards promulgated by

the federal government. Despite the fact that the Common Core State Standards Initiative is not a federal government project, running in the background like hidden programs on your computer, is the concern that they will become national standards. The collaborative work being done by the groups mentioned in Beth's article mitigates that argument and reminds me of a project I led approximately 10 years ago that is very similar conceptually.

The project involved a consortium of 20 local school districts working together to support the national goal of the United States being first in the world in mathematics and science by the year 2000. The participating school districts were among the more affluent and high achieving in the country and guarded their individuality and autonomy judiciously. We were very careful to ensure that participating in the consortium was voluntary and that our work was intended to leverage the collective resources, both financial and human capital, of the districts to improve science and mathematics education. We worked closely with the U.S. Department of Education to help us with research and to understand the international assessment work, which was the federal role. As a result, we became the first local school districts ever to participate in an international assessment. The consortium is a good example of what states can do to work with common core standards and assessments.

However, to ensure that the project culminates with successful implementation will take leaders who are willing to look at their school reform improvement initiatives with a different mind set. Leaders will have to think in terms of building a different house, as Beth suggested, to guide their work. State and local leaders will need to consider Mandela's questions and engage their constituents with a deep passion to embed these new ideas in an old education culture. This task will not be easy. Since 1957, when the Soviet Union launched the space satellite Sputnik, and the gradual evolving role of the federal government in education began, the need for some standardized initiatives has grown.

Common core standards and the logical next step of developing common assessments for these standards bring organization to what has been rather chaotic for local school district curriculum planners. For many years, school curriculum has been guided by textbooks and not by fundamental academic concepts that are considered important for students to learn. Working collaboratively with other states on standards will result in better planning and will provide a working framework for local districts to use when writing curriculum. Collaboration also allows for each state and local school district to determine what standards to use. Furthermore, developing common assessments, although they will inevitably lead to the contentious debate and comparison of scores between states, will enable researchers and practitioners to make informed decisions about how and what to teach.

The consortium I led offered summer institutes for teachers, students, administrators, and school board members. All of the work was based on what was learned by participating in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. None of the activities could have been offered without the collaborative efforts of the districts. Because they worked together, they were able to bring higher quality presenters to the sessions, build cross-district networks of teachers, and share costs. The same is true for the states working together on the standards. In addition, the states can work together on developing assessments for the agreed-upon standards, resulting in shared costs and, in all likelihood, not spending as much money (in these difficult financial times) to develop them.

The key to success is for the standards and assessments to be voluntary. Yet, while voluntary, it needs to be understood that courageous state leaders must comprehend the need to implement them in their states. Without Mandela-type leadership, this reform initiative could be one more highly publicized, much-anticipated initiative that never left the runway.

The real caveat, however, is that although voluntary now, the trend since the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957 has been a gradual increase in federal involvement in education. This trend has accelerated since 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act and now with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Race to the Top program. Even though participation in the programs is voluntary, if states want to participate, they are required to provide assurances that they are complying with the requirements of the U.S. Department of Education. Although it is highly unlikely that the United States Congress will approve

national standards or assessments in the near future, it would be a highly contentious debate; federal regulations can play a prominent role in offering incentives to accept them anyway.

The future of education is becoming somewhat of a paradox. The fact is that states and local school districts are locally controlled and not subject to federal control, but it is becoming clear that they cannot avoid the federal intrusion, either. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has made it abundantly clear that if any state or district wants federal funds from the Race to the Top program, it must comply with the federal requirements, and some of these requirements include changing state laws.

The state common core standards initiative is a positive step toward educators working collaboratively to do what is intuitively needed to support fundamentally good curriculum. The initiative allows states to remain autonomous but still work together to leverage their financial and human capital resources. The standards also provide the foundation for the future construction of the assessment house that Beth illustrated for the standards model. Yet, one important fact remains. Agreeing to standards and assessments does not mean that results will improve. For that to happen, every educator will need to think about Mandela's questions and about themselves as leaders.