



YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

FEATURE ARTICLE:

LOCALIZING THE COMMON CORE

By Beth Ratway, Senior Consultant, Learning Point Associates

The national standards movement is upon us. Many other nations around the world have jumped on board the national standards movement, understanding the importance of having a common set of high-level expectations for students. The global economy, technological innovations, and the opening of political borders have made it critical that our nation creates a common set of standards for all students to be successful contributors to the global society. Some fear that national standards take away from any ability to localize the curricula. However, by considering this work as “the practice of being humble enough to admit that someone else has a better process and wise enough to learn how to match or even surpass them,” it becomes possible to begin to move forward and build a solid local framework for all students’ learning (National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, & Achieve, Inc., 2008, p. 9).

Developing the Common Core

The National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), in partnership with Achieve, ACT, and the College Board, came together in 2008 to lead the development of a set of national standards in mathematics and English language arts called the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The two major components of this initiative are the development of college- and career-ready standards and the development of K–12 standards.

Development of the college- and career-ready standards began in spring 2009. At the urging of NGA and CCSSO, 48 states and three territories agreed to adopt the standards developed as part of the CCSSI. In fall 2009, NGA and CCSSO created a National Policy Forum to develop a process and expectations for the development of “research and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked” standards (NGA, 2009). They then created work groups of content experts from ACT, Achieve, and the College Board. The work groups developed the standards using a facilitated process. CCSSO Executive Director Gene Wilhoit advised that the college- and career-ready standards needed to be “fewer, clearer, and higher” (NGA, 2009).

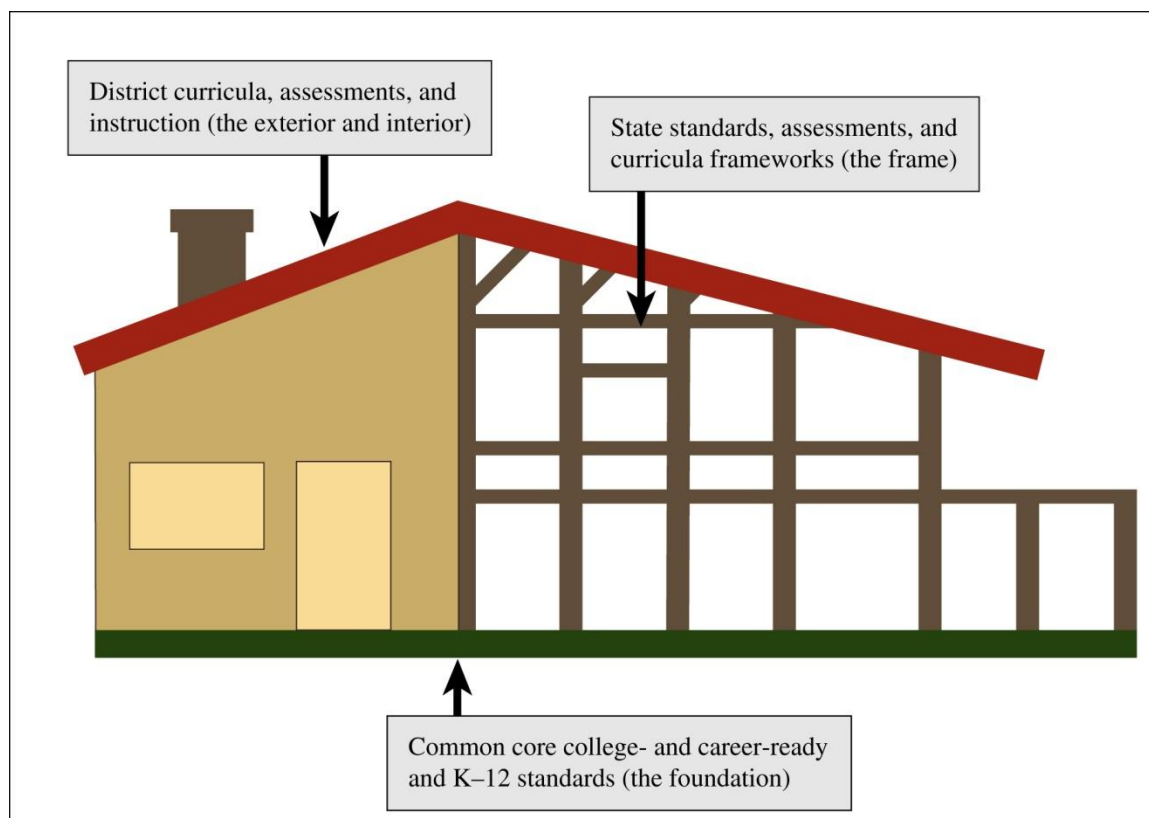
Draft documents were sent to feedback groups to provide research-based input. In late September, the college- and career-ready standards were posted for public comment. At the same time, work groups began to develop the K–12 state standards documents. Feedback loops and public comment for the K–12 standards took place in November 2009. A validation committee consisting of experts chosen by state governors and chiefs will vet the final comments and both sets of standards in early 2010. This group will conduct a final review of the process and content of the standards to ensure that they are research based and internationally benchmarked. The finalized version of the entire common core, consisting of the college- and career-ready standards and the K–12 standards, will be released to the public in February 2010.

The national standards movement is in full force in the United States. In the meantime, the big question that many state education agencies (SEAs) have been asking is, **“What can states do to ensure their own readiness for implementation and what should districts expect?”** Illinois and Wisconsin are ahead of the game. These states have been forward thinkers in terms of laying the groundwork and being ready to align or adopt the Common Core Standards when they are released. Illinois and Wisconsin began the review of their own state standards prior to the work of the development of the common core and were able to use this work to review and comment on the common core. But what are the next steps? This article offers several ideas for adoption for states to consider after the Common Core Standards are released. For clarification, this article will use the term Common Core Standards to refer to both parts of the CCSS, the college- and career-ready standards and the K–12 standards.

Laying the Foundation

The process of localizing the Common Core Standards resembles the process of building a house (see Figure 1). The Common Core State Standards Initiative can be thought of as the foundation. The Common Core Standards are the essential components that are critical to a solid education. States that have agreed to adopt the Common Core Standards must agree to incorporate 85 percent of these standards into their individual state standards. The state standards form the frame of the house. They build off the foundation and are connected to the design specifications of the state. The local curricula are the interior—the walls, rooms, and décor. These curricula are designed based on the needs of the client, who is the student.

Figure 1. Localizing the Common Core



The Common Core Standards—the foundation of the work—connect directly to the work of the SEAs (the frame) and local education agencies (LEAs) (the interior). The national process for building the foundation has begun. SEAs and LEAs may want to go through a similar process to begin to build the frame and the interior. One way that states can begin is to use a four-step process to incorporate the common core into their current work. The process can consist of four actions: analyze, adjust, assess, and assist.

Analyze. To build the frame, states first have to understand the key components of the foundation. Illinois began this work by bringing together their American Diploma Project core content teams to unpack the Common Core Standards. Illinois specifically used these teams to give feedback during the process of the Common Core work. This approach allowed the teams to review, analyze, and unpack the Common Core Standards. The next step for states could be to begin to think about the impact of the Common Core Standards work for LEAs and to think about creating a plan to help LEAs implement the work.

A first step for LEAs might be to use K–12 content teams to review and analyze the frame, comparing the Common Core Standards, the state standards, and their current curricula. These teams can create a chart that outlines the key adjustments made to the state standards. LEAs then can use the chart to analyze their current curricula and assessments. This process will identify the current connections between the state standards and also will identify critical gaps.

Adjust. Illinois and Wisconsin are now deciding how to address the gaps between the states' current standards and the Common Core Standards. Some current standards may fit under each of the Common Core Standards; more than one may fit under one of the Common Core Standards. States may use content teams to decide how to address this overlap. Should they keep the wording of the current standard and organize it under the Common Core Standards, or should they reword the current language to better reflect the newer standards? Some state standards may not fit under the Common Core Standards; in this case, teams can begin to address the 15 percent of standards that can be outside of the Common Core Standards. Following are several tools that can help SEAs and LEAs move forward with this work:

- **Criteria for High-Quality Standards.** Achieve has outlined [four criteria](#) for evaluating standards: clear, specific, rigorous, and teachable. Achieve has developed a rubric to help states with this evaluation. The rubric is accessible to all states, and states can use it to evaluate the standards that do not connect with the Common Core to decide if each standard should be kept as part of the new standards document. States also add other critical components to the rubric that connect directly to their own missions and visions.
- **Framework for Learning.** States can also use [the framework for learning](#) outlined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills to identify the critical components of the frame they would like to build.
- **Rigor/Relevance Framework.** Content writing groups at the state level could use [the Rigor/Relevance Framework](#), developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education, to write the grade-level standards. The state can go deeper when adjusting standards and develop more specific and individualized standards. Individualization can come from the development of grade-level expectations for districts to use to best guide their own implementation.

LEAs can use a three-circle audit process outlined in *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001) to help adjust their work. The outermost circle is the content that students need to be familiar with, the middle circle is the content and skills that are essential for students to know and do, and the innermost circle outlines the critical priorities or “enduring understandings” that all students have to be able to know and do. LEAs can go through this process to help unpack the state standards and to determine what is most important and nonnegotiable in terms of student learning at the local level.

Assess. When a house is being built, inspectors are continuously assessing the quality and structure of the house to ensure that it is solid and will stand the test of time. SEAs can play the role of inspectors and examine the current standards to assess the breadth and depth and the connections to their local contexts. States also may want to build tools (assessments) that continuously provide feedback regarding the rigor and relevance of the standards.

SEAs can reflect on their assessment systems to see if they are assessing the standards that build the foundation for learning. An alignment study can show how the current system assesses the Common Core Standards and the state standards. At the same time, SEAs can reflect on the purpose of the statewide assessment system. States need to begin to revisit the content and structure of the state assessment system

and use this opportunity to look at developing a more innovative balanced system that allows for assessment and collection of summative and formative assessment data. Wisconsin has begun this work with the [Next Generation Assessment Task Force](#). State teams can look at the Common Core Standards and the state standards to identify how these two sets can be assessed at the state level and how the standards and which set can be best assessed at the local level. Achieve has developed [a protocol](#) titled the “Criteria for Aligned Assessments” that can help states analyze their current assessments.

Because building a new statewide assessment system can be costly, especially in a time with limited resources, NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve (2008) suggest states that have signed on to the Common Core Standards build consortia to work together to write and develop assessments:

However, states can save time and money by sharing resources and expertise to develop high-quality voluntary assessments or a common pool of assessment items. That kind of collective effort also can ensure the availability of voluntary assessments or assessment items that are aligned with the internationally benchmarked standards to be developed through the Common State Standards Initiative. (p. 26)

LEAs can have content teams review existing curriculum documents and develop curriculum documents that align to the current work. LEAs also can analyze current assessment systems. They can look at developing a more innovative balanced assessment system made up of formative and summative assessments.

Assist. The interior of the house is what makes a house a home. The interior is the personalized piece of the house-building process. To help LEAs design and personalize their local curricula, SEAs can develop a statewide system of support for local implementation of the Common Core Standards and the state standards. The system of support can include developing frameworks for learning, grade-specific curricula guides for districts to use, outlining best practice frameworks for high-quality instruction, or building online professional development modules that highlight high-quality implementation in classrooms. For best results, SEAs can work with partners in the state, such as educational service agencies (ESAs), professional organizations, and higher education institutions, and use technology to develop comprehensive professional development support for administrators, parents, and teachers. States can build rubrics that outline the key components and processes of the implementation process, which districts can use to develop a more comprehensive, directed plan for implementing the standards and for building assessments.

One strategy that SEAs can use is the three-circle audit process mentioned earlier. SEAs can help districts undergo this process to help unpack the state standards and to determine what is most important and nonnegotiable in terms of student learning. Following are some other strategies that SEAs may want to consider with their school districts; these tools highlight best practices regarding assessment, curricula, and instruction critical to successful implementation of the standards. The tools can be used by SEAs, LEAs, ESAs, and regional comprehensive centers to begin to identify professional development needs for educators in terms of implementing the localized work on the Common Core Standards.

- **Needs Assessment Tool.** The Center on Instruction is focused on creating and using scientifically based tools to identify gaps in student achievement and better inform professional development needs. [The Needs Assessment Tool for Mathematics Professional Development](#) identifies and connects student learning expectations to state standards and assessments. The data can be used to identify professional development needs and to build high-quality professional development programs that impact student learning.
- **Keys to Learning Tool.** The [Keys to Learning online tool](#) from McREL takes districts through six critical questions that are essential to making standards a reality in the classroom. SEAs can work with state affiliates of content organizations and the Association of School Curriculum Developers to develop a comprehensive platform for districts to use for implementation. The platform can include a detailed outline describing and connecting assessments, curricula, and instruction.

LEAs can develop an implementation plan focusing on how to help administrators and teachers develop a culture of learning. They can use the questions that are part of the Keys to Learning online tool to better

identify implementation needs of educators and develop professional development programs that will assist classroom teachers in incorporating standards-based best practices into their instruction.

Every step is critical when building a house. The process begins by building a strong foundation. The next step is to design and build a solid framework. The final step is to design an interior that reflects the individual. Each step of the process is critical to the success of the other steps. The same concept applies to building a set of Common Core Standards. The four-step process described in this article can be useful when thinking of the connection between national standards, state standards, and local curricula. Each piece is connected with the other pieces to build a solid framework for learning for each individual student. Because the Common Core Standards are being finalized at the national level, now is the perfect time for states to consider how to align and localize the standards to positively impact student learning.

References

- National Governors Association. (2009, July 1). *Common core standards development work group and feedback group announced*. (News Release). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 31, 2009, from <http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.6c9a8a9ebc6ae07eee28aca9501010a0/?vgnnextoid=60e20e4d3d132210VgnVCM1000005e00100aRCRD>
- National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, & Achieve, Inc. (2008). *Benchmarking for success: Ensuring U.S. students receive a world-class education*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 31, 2009, from <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0812benchmarking.pdf>
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2009). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Tucson, AZ: Author. Retrieved December 1, 2009, from http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/P21_Framework.pdf
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2001). *Understanding by Design*. New York: Prentice Hall.