

By STEPHANIE BERRY

Curriculum standards in the United States in the past few decades have been all over the board.

Some states choose one set of standards to follow while other states have different standards that they implement for their students. Different states cover different topics at different grade levels. This has caused mass confusion in the education field. Which standards of curriculum do we follow? Do we need educational standards?

This has been a much debated topic in the last few years. The push for states to be held responsible for student achievement began years ago with the “Accountability Movement.” As part of education reform governors and corporate leaders founded the organization Achieve in 1996. This organization’s goal was to raise academic standards, graduation requirements, and improve assessments in all 50 states.

This visionary plan has helped make college and career readiness a priority in the U.S. (Achieve, 2011). Education reform continues to be ever changing and standards of achievement have continued to be even more perplexing, but in 2009 education reform made a huge leap forward in aligning curriculum in all states in establishing Common Core Standards.

The Common Core Standards Initiative is an education movement that strives to create unified curriculum standards across the United States. The goal is to provide clear expectations of readiness skills students need to know in order to become prepared for college or career paths. This push is led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. As of 2010, forty-six states have agreed to back the initiative to create common academic standards. (McNeil, 2010)

Creating Common Core Standards for all U.S. schools has raised some mixed emotions, but overall 80 percent of the K-12 population across the nation has approved the decision that we need a standard curriculum. District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have also agreed to come aboard in the push to see all students succeed.

Even though this initiative has been widely accepted, not all states are jumping on the educational band wagon. Alaska, Missouri, Texas, and South Carolina have decided to opt out of the initiative instead choosing to design their own curriculum standards.

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The Core Standards will build upon current curriculum already established with the goal of preparing all students for success. These standards will include critical content knowledge in language arts and mathematics. Language Art standards will include classic American literature and other stories from around the world. Foundational documents as well as Shakespeare will be included in the core standards to build upon literary skills. These standards will require students to gain knowledge through reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Core Standards, 2010).

Mathematic standards will build upon the foundations already learned and encourage students to apply more math concepts and procedures. Students will be prepared to apply their mathematic concepts in real world situations using reasoning skills. These acquired skills will help students develop and acknowledge the ability to apply mathematics in their everyday life and further use in college/career.

The Common Core Standards will help unify all state standards across the board, so all will be on the same curriculum page. Educators across the country were asked for guidance in creating the standards. The standards were created to help students become prepared for college and in career paths.

An academic study, "Reaching the Goal" led by David T. Conley, the chief executive officer of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, polled college entry professors and asked the question, if common core standards were applicable in their entry level courses?

According to Michael W. Kist, a professor of Education at Stanford University, "The standards "suggest strong support for validity of common-core standards, in terms of their applicability to college courses and their importance, and the appropriate level of challenge for students to be successful" (Gewertz, 2011).

As state and school districts work to redefine the new standards, this poll and other research will help to clearly define and prioritize what the main standards in education should be focused on.

Another added incentive to governors across the nation is the federal economic stimulus money associated with the Race to the Top fund. This fund is estimated to be 4.35 billion and will be handed out in forms of competitive grants to states by Secretary (Arne) Duncan. The competition of these grants has provided the motivation needed for states to adopt the standards. Both President Obama and Secretary Duncan are in favor of the common core standards and will further encourage governors and states to lend a helping hand in creating common content standards (McNeil, 2010).

The common core standards will continue to be a state led effort and are planned to be implemented in all states by 2015. Parents, teachers, school administrators and experts from across the country together with state leaders, are leading the effort to develop a common core of state standards. (Core standards, 2012) Educators have provided useful information and guidance in creating these standards. Teachers are in the trenches daily and know what works in their classrooms. What better ways to use their insight in helping all students succeed?

How do we “adopt” the standards into our classrooms and make them a reality? It is critical to have support from our administrators. Enthusiasm is contagious and teachers need motivation just as much as our students. Motivation and encouragement is key. It is likely that teachers will be overwhelmed with the changes but a positive attitude and encouragement just might get the ball rolling. Professional development and extra teacher training will also help aid in the process of implementing these new standards.

Common Core Standard Initiative is a vital change needed in education reform. Continuing down the same ole road isn't an option. These standards give us some guidelines to go by, but also allow states to have a hand in creating their own standards. This is the best of both worlds! Only time will tell if this initiative will help students truly succeed, but I feel it is a good way to start. I always do better when I have clearly defined expectations, and so is the same with the common core standards. It will give teachers their own way to “benchmark” the curriculum they are teaching and stay ahead of the educational curve. Change is always hard when you are going through it, but often times its when we are on the other side that we realize what an important step we have just completed.

Editor's Note: Stephanie Berry is completing her Master's degree at Cumberland University.