

Spotlight Falls on Common Core Standards

In recent months, a set of academic standards for K-12 students in English language arts and mathematics called the Common Core State Standards has been generating a fair amount of controversy. In response, the WASB Board of Directors has directed the Government Relations team to prepare information on these standards that is factual in nature to help Wisconsin school boards better understand these new standards and their impact.

Academic standards define what students should know and be able to do in given academic subjects at each grade level. They set goals or benchmarks. While academic standards establish what students need to learn, in theory, standards do not dictate how teachers should teach, and are not a curriculum.

The concept of adopting state academic standards is not new. Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards, first adopted in 1998, cover 21 separate content areas. These 1998 standards were criticized on the grounds that they lacked depth, were written only at grades 4, 8, and 12, and that the standards in reading/language and mathematics were not considered "college and career ready."

The 2001 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required states to adopt academic content standards and achievement standards that "include the same knowledge, skills and levels of achievement expected of all children." The premise behind standards-based reform is that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual student outcomes.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recognized a need for clearer and more rigorous standards aligned to postsecondary and workforce expectations, and began to work on updating Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards in 2006.

In 2009, midway through Wisconsin's standards revision process,

the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) initiated a discussion around creating a common set of college- and career-ready benchmarks for mathematics and English language arts.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) evolved from those discussions.

While adoption of the CCSS was voluntary for states, 45 states, including Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia have chosen to adopt the CCSS.

The CCSS were adopted in Wisconsin by State Superintendent Tony Evers in June 2010 through a proclamation adopting the CCSS as the basis for curriculum, instruction and assessment in English language arts and mathematics in Wisconsin as a set of "college-and career-readiness" standards.

Wisconsin is also part of a 30-state consortium involved in developing a new student assessment system aligned with the CCSS. The Smarter Balanced assessment is intended to fulfill both state and federal accountability requirements in English and mathematics, using computer-adaptive testing. Lawmakers have approved funding for Smarter Balanced tests in grades 3-8, and the ACT suite of tests, which are also aligned to the CCSS, in grades 9-11, beginning in 2014-15.

Over time, controversy surrounding the CCSS has arisen nationally. In the 2013-15 biennial budget act, state lawmakers, mindful of these concerns, directed a review of Wisconsin's implementation of the CCSS in English language arts and mathematics, which must be completed before the DPI may further implement the CCSS. Specifically, the Legislature and the Governor called for:

- The DPI to provide a written evaluation of the CCSS by Sept. 1, 2013;

- The non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau to report on the fiscal impact of adopting or not adopting the CCSS by Sept. 1, 2013; and
- The DPI to hold at least three public meetings around the state and take public testimony regarding the adoption of educational standards.

School leaders may wish to testify at these public hearings on the costs they have already incurred and efforts they have undertaken to review curriculum and provide professional development aligned to the CCSS. An unanswered question is: if the CCSS are not implemented, what standards will take their place and what assessments aligned to these standards will be available and at what cost?

Wisconsin has a long tradition of local control. To some extent, controversy over the CCSS reflects a concern that the local school board's role in determining curriculum and instructional materials may be usurped if common standards that apply across various states are implemented. The hearings will likely shed light on this issue as well.

The WASB Delegate Assembly has not taken a specific position on the CCSS. It is likely that the Policy & Resolutions Committee will consider bringing forward a resolution on the CCSS to the 2014 Delegate Assembly for a vote. The WASB Government Relations staff will continue to gather information on the CCSS for members, including the reports cited above, and will post this information on the WASB website. Watch the weekly *Legislative Update* for additional developments regarding the CCSS and information on the time and location of the public hearings. ■