

Common Core, Uncommon Controversy

Common Core Standards appear safe in Wisconsin, for now

Now that the work of a pair of special legislative study committees reviewing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and mathematics has been nearly completed, it appears likely those standards will remain in place, at least for the time being. However, their future and especially their lifespan remains somewhat unclear as legislators appear poised to review them carefully, perhaps with an eye toward adopting Wisconsin-specific standards.

In mid-December, separate reports were released by the Assembly and Senate select committees charged with reviewing the CCSS. The reports differ in their focus, and while both reports recommend regular legislative review of the standards (see below), neither recommends outright repeal.

The Assembly report calls for reasserting legislative control over standards adoption in Wisconsin and a prompt review of the CCSS mathematics and English language arts standards as well as a review of Wisconsin's recent attempt to revise these standards completed in 2009. Committee members suggest that the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) should halt the adoption of other nationally developed standards, such as science or social studies standards currently under development (by organizations other than those that developed the CCSS), arguing that "Wisconsin is best served by creating Wisconsin-based educational standards."

The Senate report calls for establishing guidelines for the adoption of academic standards in Wisconsin with legislative review, along with the

establishment of a state review board that would be responsible for periodic review of state standards. It also recommends delaying the rollout of the "Smarter Balanced" test, which aligns with new Common Core Standards, for two years to allow lawmakers to review how that test is working in other states.

■ Next Steps Unclear

Throughout the study committee review period, many observers questioned whether lawmakers, particularly conservative lawmakers who dominated the study panels, could reach a consensus on a course of action. That question remains unanswered.

As his committee signed off on its report, state Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt (R-Fond du Lac), chair of the Assembly study committee, indicated to reporters that he doesn't plan to collaborate with his Senate counterpart, Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee), the Senate study committee chair. Instead, Rep. Thiesfeldt indicated that his role was only to chair the committee and suggested it may be left to others to draft legislation suggested by his committee.

Thiesfeldt summarized his committee's main focus when he stated, "The committee strongly believes Wisconsin is best served when our schools are guided by Wisconsin-based standards. Our state must immediately begin working to reassert local control of schools, protect student privacy and data, prepare our students with standards for STEM-related vocations, and implement a process to review our current standards—including Common Core English language arts and Common

Core mathematics standards."

Meanwhile, Sen. Farrow delayed a vote by his study committee after Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa), a committee member, called publicly for a full repeal of the CCSS.

The divergent viewpoints reflected in the reports and public positions taken by some committee members suggest that reaching a consensus remains one of the biggest roadblocks to any definitive legislative action on the CCSS.

■ Path to Controversy

It's worth remembering that the CCSS were not always so controversial. In fact, after State Superintendent Tony Evers adopted the Common Core Standards in June 2010, the Wisconsin Legislature took a number of actions that appeared to reaffirm that decision. In June 2011, for example, lawmakers included a provision in the 2011-13 biennial budget act that required the DPI to replace the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) with new pupil assessments that measured mastery of the CCSS.

Then in January 2012, the Governor's Read to Lead Task Force recommendations included a DPI review and update of Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards to ensure alignment of early childhood learning standards with the CCSS.

More recently, in the current 2013-15 budget act, lawmakers provided funding for the state's use of a new "Smarter Balanced" assessment system and ACT Suite of tests that will be aligned to the CCSS and also provided funding for a state-wide educator effectiveness system

An Assembly report calls for reasserting legislative control over standards adoption in Wisconsin.

that will use CCSS-aligned assessments, along with other data, to evaluate teachers and principals.

During this period, however, public controversy over the standards was brewing among groups at both ends of the political spectrum, and particularly from conservatives.

■ Common Core Viewpoints

In Wisconsin, lawmakers responded to these varied criticisms by calling upon the DPI to hold a series of hearings on the standards and by forming separate special study committees in each house to hold their own hearings around the state to gather information.

The Senate and Assembly select committees, as the study panels were called, held four hearings around the state — in Madison, Fond du Lac, Eau Claire and Wausau. Many school leaders testified at those hearings about the steps they had taken to implement the Common Core Standards and the impact the new standards were having on student achievement. Many opponents also testified, raising a number of strong concerns.

In general, there was agreement in the testimony on the following points:

- Rigorous state standards are desirable, and the CCSS are more detailed, specific and rigorous than Wisconsin's 1998 Model Academic Standards in English language arts and mathematics they replaced;
- The responsibility for determining what curriculum and instructional materials will be used in a district should remain with local school boards and districts; and
- Student data privacy should be safeguarded.

Testimony in support of the standards included the following points:

- The CCSS cover all grade levels (rather than only three as under the state's former Model Academic Standards); thus, they

provide uniformity and give teachers a better idea of the skills students should have at each grade level;

- Having common standards will help students stay on track academically if they transfer to other districts;
- The CCSS and the tests aligned to them will help hold schools and teachers accountable; and
- School districts have already spent large amount of time and money implementing the standards.

Among the concerns expressed were the following:

- The federal government exerted undue influence on states to coerce them to adopt the CCSS;
- The process of adopting and implementing the CCSS was not transparent;
- The range of choices in instructional materials may be limited because publishers will align materials to the CCSS; and
- Wisconsin should have standards that are uniquely adapted to the needs of Wisconsin students, which may not be possible because the CCSS are copyrighted.

A number of these concerns were addressed by the recommendations the eight-member Assembly committee (6 Republicans, 2 Democrats) voted to adopt:

- The legislature should modify current law to ensure the privacy of student data.
- The legislature should restrict the collection of biometric student data.
- The DPI should create a STEM-based addendum to Wisconsin 9-12 standards.
- The legislature should affirm the existing authority of Wisconsin K-12 public school boards to choose and adopt their own:

- local academic standards;
- curricular materials; and
- instructional methods.

- The legislature should establish a statutory process for the continued review and adoption of model academic standards that reasserts legislative control and includes substantial public input. That process should include review and consideration of Wisconsin's prior revision attempts, incorporating the mathematic and English language arts standards that were revised and completed in 2009. Additionally, the process should begin with a review of mathematics and English language arts standards.
- The legislature urges DPI to refrain from adopting any Common Core-related or any other curricular materials. These decisions are best left to local school boards.
- The legislature should aggressively oppose any direct or indirect effort by the federal government to further intrude into Wisconsin K-12 education. Academic standards shall be adopted locally, without federal interference, and statewide assessments shall be adopted at the state level, upon the approval of the legislature.
- Wisconsin is best served by creating Wisconsin-based educational standards.

Recommendations 3 and 4 were adopted unanimously. All others were adopted by a (6-2) party line vote. With no final action yet by the Senate committee, exactly what legislation will be brought forward and/or adopted remains to be seen.

For information on the final recommendations, if any, advanced by the Senate Select Committee on Common Core Standards, please consult the Legislative Update in your weekly *eConnection*, the WASB electronic newsletter. ■