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Advocates Unite to Promote Standards' Adoption

Groups Dispensing Information and Advice

By Catherine Gewertz

With the new **common standards** completed, education leaders in nearly every state face the critical decision of whether to adopt them. To maximize the number of states that do, a core group of advocates is providing information and advice to help build the necessary base of support.

The support network includes groups that spearheaded the Common Core State Standards Initiative, such as the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Also included are key partners in the project, such as Achieve; the high school improvement group Alliance for Excellent Education; the civil rights group Campaign for High School Equity; the Council of State Governments, which represents state government leaders; the National Association of State Boards of Education; and the James B. Hunt Jr. Institute, a North Carolina-based school reform group. All receive funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with most of the grants specifically geared to supporting the common standards.

Riding on the adoption decisions is the possibility that, for the first time, states will embrace one shared set of academic expectations for all students.

Against that landscape, common-standards advocacy groups are focusing on helping states and supportive local education organizations communicate the importance of the standards, dispel inaccuracies, and highlight essential political messages. “There isn’t really a blueprint we’re all following,” said Michael Cohen, the president of **Achieve**, a Washington-based group that helped shape the standards. “It’s somewhat overlapping [sets of] people and groups who are supporters of the common standards who are trying to communicate and coordinate as much as possible.”

Shared Expectations

Proponents of the common standards argue that a shared set of learning expectations is needed to remedy state-to-state variations in standards, which leave too many students unprepared for productive futures. They also contend that states could save money by cooperating on standards and assessments rather than acting on their own.

Some opponents, however, see the effort as an attempt to nationalize education decisions, a perception fueled by federal incentives to adopt the common standards. Others charge that the standards shortchange academic content in favor of skills, while still others argue that their expectations are too demanding or not demanding enough.

Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia pledged last year to participate in devising mathematics and English/language arts standards, but that pledge did not obligate them to adopt. At least one of the participating states, Virginia, has since said it will stick with its own standards.

Most states plan to adopt them, however, urged on in part by the

possibility of securing a share of the \$4 billion in federal economic-stimulus money offered in the U.S. Department of Education's **Race to the Top** grant competition, which favors states that adopt the standards by Aug. 2. Four states tentatively approved the standards in draft form, while two others adopted them once they were final.

To smooth the way as states consider the standards, **the Hunt Institute**, led by former North Carolina Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., has drafted and distributed talking points and fact sheets. It has also hired as a state-outreach consultant Lucille Davy, a former New Jersey education commissioner, who is responding to state requests for information and other assistance.

One of the groups the Hunt Institute has helped is the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Excellent Education. Linda M. Noonan, its executive director, said her members saw promise in the standards but had questions. The institute responded by flying the lead writers of the standards to Boston for a meeting in March, along with officials of the institute and Achieve.

"The meeting clearly provided our members with a more accurate understanding of what the goal was and what kinds of things could be accomplished," said Ms. Noonan.

The CCSSO and the NGA both work through their members to dispense information in support of common-standards adoption. They have focused in particular on six states—Massachusetts, Minnesota, Georgia, Colorado, California, and Florida—that have rigorous standards, working closely with them in the drafting and feedback stages in a bid to ensure that the common set is as strong as their own, and talking extensively with states that have weak standards to prepare them for the "harsh realities" they could face upon adoption, according to CCSSO Executive Director Gene Wilhoit.

The **Council of Chief State School Officers** is drawing on a

\$1.2 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to provide states with technical assistance, including hiring Keith Gayler, a former senior policy analyst in the Maryland education department, to do state outreach. (The foundation also underwrites coverage of district and high school reform in *Education Week*.)

Minority Voices

To build knowledge and support among parents, local community members, and civil rights groups, the **Campaign for High School Equity** is working with affiliates of its member organizations, such as the National Council of La Raza. Delia Pompa, La Raza's vice president for education, said it is particularly important that minority communities understand what is at stake and have a voice in the passage and implementation of the common standards.

"We've been supportive of common standards since they've been a thought," she said. "Our kids won't have a shot if we don't have them. They are the ones most likely to be left behind and be victims of low standards. We have taken a strong stand here and are figuring out how to explain this to our communities."

The **Alliance for Excellent Education** has produced white papers about the importance of the standards and state-by-state flashcards that detail ways each state could benefit by approving them. Its president, former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, has criss-crossed the country with a Power Point presentation, explaining how teaching to a set of high, common standards can reduce the high school dropout rate.

Alliance officials are also keeping Capitol Hill policymakers informed of the progress of the standards and discussing ways federal lawmakers might support them once they are enacted, such as with funding for ongoing administration of assessments designed to reflect the standards, said Elizabeth G. Schneider, an

alliance vice president who oversees common-standards advocacy.

Clamoring for Help

Some of the groups are facilitating comparisons. The **Thomas B. Fordham Institute** hired outside experts to analyze the common standards, and plans another report comparing each state's standards with the common set. Achieve developed a Web-based tool that will allow each state to compare its standards against the common ones and is providing information about how the standards compare with expectations reflected in international benchmarks and in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Two organizations, the Arlington, Va.-based **National Association of State Boards of Education** and the Lexington, Ky.-based **Council of State Governments**, convened meetings for members to provide information and facilitate discussions about the common standards.

Brenda Welburn, NASBE's executive director, said her members had been left largely out of the loop as state education departments took part in standards development. To address that, the association brought state school board members together in four regional gatherings last winter, to work through questions and issues, a crucial step, she said, since in nearly all states, the boards are charged with approving standards.

The Council of State Governments, which includes state lawmakers and other government leaders among its members, is holding five regional meetings and 15 state-specific meetings aimed at the education committee chairs of state legislatures. "States are calling us, clamoring for this," said Pam Goins, the organization's director of education policy. "Legislators have typically not been in the conversation, and we feel their voice is critical. Even though they are typically not the ones adopting the

standards, when it comes to implementation, it will be in their laps, with funding for textbook adoption, preservice training, and more. They will be heavily involved.”

Bipartisan Backing

The **Council of the Great City Schools** has been lining up support among its members, the nation’s largest urban districts. High-profile backers from both political parties, such as Govs. Mitchell E. Daniels Jr. of Indiana and Jack Markell of Delaware, and former Govs. Hunt of North Carolina, Roy Romer of Colorado, and Jeb Bush of Florida, as well as former state education commissioners such as Massachusetts’ David P. Driscoll, are assisting by writing opinion essays for news organizations, appearing on panel discussions about the common core, or talking informally with colleagues.

When Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty issued a statement in March saying that adoption of the common standards in mathematics would “water down” that state’s expectations, for instance, Gov. Hunt consulted with his staff at the institute and with Jason Zimba, one of the lead writers of the common math standards. Mr. Hunt then called Gov. Pawlenty—a member of the Hunt Institute’s board—to discuss the matter. He reported later to Judith Rizzo, the institute’s executive director, that it had been “a good conversation” and that Gov. Pawlenty agreed to consult state staff members and consider the issue further, according to Ms. Rizzo.

In addition to penning an opinion piece for *The Boston Globe*, Mr. Driscoll also telephoned Jamie Gass, the director of the Center for School Reform at the Pioneer Institute, which has attacked the common standards in a stream of reports and commentary pieces.

“There are people who, in my judgment, jumped the gun in being negative and urging my state not to adopt them,” Mr. Driscoll

said of the Boston-based research and advocacy group. "I felt I had to speak out. I think they're wrong, but we just agreed to disagree."

Too Much Influence?

Some who are critical of the move to common standards decry what they see as the policy-shaping effect of substantial support from the federal government and the **Gates Foundation**.

(Editorial Projects in Education, the publisher of *Education Week*, also receives grant money from the philanthropy.)

"The only way to get this adopted on a widespread basis is with a fair amount of arm-twisting and coercion," said Jay P. Greene, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. "States and districts are in a horrible budget crisis, so support follows the money."

Gates foundation officials said their support of the common standards is a natural outgrowth of their work to improve student achievement. The view that such support can have outsized influence on policy just comes with the territory, said foundation spokesman Chris Williams.

"That's a problem of philanthropy, not just the Gates Foundation," Mr. Williams said. "The appropriate role for us is to find opportunities that align to our strategic vision and put resources there in an attempt to catalyze change. That's what philanthropies do."

Most states will adopt the common standards, predicted Michael J. Petrilli, the vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which has backed the idea of common standards but has had both praise and criticism for this set. He predicted that more than 30 states would adopt.

Former Gov. Romer, who discussed the standards at a dinner meeting last month with staff members from the state legislature, state school boards association and others in New

York, said great positive energy is behind the common standards in the states.

“My reading around the country is that states are saying it’s time do this, we need to do it together, and we want to stay in charge of it so it doesn’t become a federal operation,” Mr. Romer said.

“They feel strongly we can shape this, and they’re right.”

Even if most states adopt the standards, the road to implementation could be rocky, some observers predicted.

Parents, teachers, or subject-matter groups might raise objections once they see how the standards and curriculum play out in the classroom, said Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. That is what happened in the early 1990s, a few years after the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards were widely embraced, he said.

“You can get every single elite group on the same page,” Mr. Loveless said, “and once they’re actualized in the classroom, you can get some real dissent.”

Vol. 29, Issue 33, Pages 1,18-19

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