

Issues in school governance

Massachusetts Association of School Committees

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USER'S GUIDE TO THE COMMON CORE

This **ISSUES IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE** publication is the first in a new series of informational pamphlets that MASC will be providing to members on recent and pending critical school governance issues. We hope these updates will be helpful to you in developing any supporting policies and procedures, working with your administrative leadership to implement any changes that may be necessary in the district or in your classrooms and communicating these issues and their impact to your community.

Q: What is this thing called the Common Core, and why should my district care about it?

A: The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was developed to ensure that all high school students are college/career ready upon graduation. It aligns expectations for student achievement with the demands of college and careers in the 21st century. It represents a common platform for states to compare student performance. These new standards will require for some teachers dramatically different methods and goals for instruction, with the intent of teaching students to think and express themselves critically, conceptually and in-depth in both English Language Arts and mathematics. They will be expected to focus on enhanced literacy and comprehension and creative, real-world, analytical problem solving skills.

Q: Who came up with this set of standards and what was the rationale for this latest round of education reform?

A: The impetus for the development of a single set of national Common Core standards was the realization of the inconsistencies between states' tests on the part of members of a number of organizations. Among the best known of these are the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers who represent the state education commissioners. They were concerned that states varied widely in the content and scoring of their high school "exit" tests and other assessments mandated under the No Child Left Behind legislation. With private funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others, this coalition of governors, state education commissioners and a team of education consultants went to work to create a single set of skills and

standards and common grading criteria. And while federal agencies did not have a role in the program's creation, the Obama administration gave strong vocal support to the creation of the standards, tying grants for Race to the Top dollars in exchange for an agreement to implement the Common Core. Since 2010, 46 states and the District of Columbia have signed onto the program. Massachusetts is both a Race to the Top grant winner and a signatory to the Common Core.

Q: What is the timeline for implementing these standards?

A: The current plans call for the 2014-2015 school year to be the first to administer the new assessment tests that will measure how well teachers are teaching and students are learning the skills identified in the Common Core. However, the US Department of Education may authorize delays to give states that need it more time to put the system in place.

Q: I keep hearing that some states have already begun to implement the Common Core. What are we doing in Massachusetts?

A: The standards were first introduced in June, 2010 and since that time school districts have been working to understand how the new expectations will translate into the classroom. Across the country, more than 1,000 individual school districts have been examining how closely their existing curricula align to the Common Core standards and, where necessary, evaluating curriculum adjustments. Based on these changes, school districts are also beginning to plan for appropriate professional development for teachers to teach to these new, more rigorous standards. Among those field-testing sample

test questions and evaluation approaches are a number of districts in Massachusetts, which was one of a handful of states that served as a model for the development, delivery and ultimately management of the standards and related assessments.

Q: Why do I keep hearing “Common Core standards” and “upcoming train wreck” in the same sentence? Should I be worried that our students are not going to meet the new standards?

A: Under the new standards, many students and teachers will face dramatically changed, and more demanding, expectations for math and literacy skills. These skills will be evaluated in new ways from our current MCAS system. Some school districts will find that their existing curricula and teaching strategies are already aligned with the new requirements. Teachers who emphasize critical thinking and analysis as well as creativity will be right at home with the adjustments. Other districts will confront fundamental shifts in learning and practice for both classroom teachers and students. Teaching to the MCAS test, long a criticism of the current system, will evolve under the Common Core into preparing students to respond to questions that require critical thinking that requires good problem solving and analysis skills.

Closing this anticipated curriculum gap will require considerable time, tools and real professional development and technology. There will also be a cost to implement effectively the new expectations and assessments. As one observer has noted, implementing the standards “is not about thinking out of the box. It is about transforming the box itself.”

Q: When I hear about assessments, I keep hearing the term “PARCC.” What is this?

A: PARCC stands for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, one of the two groups that are designing consistent, high-quality math and ELA/literacy tests for grades 3-11 based on the Common Core standards. Early field tests and sample assessment items have already been published to help districts understand what will be expected and

some districts have already begun to phase in practice “testlets” in order to assess what gaps exist, from a both a learning and technology standpoint.

Q: How are the new tests different from our current, high standards MCAS tests?

A: MCAS is essentially a multiple-choice test of what students already know and can demonstrate. It measures how well students have learned the current curriculum as set by the state. Instead of MCAS, the new assessment system, PARCC, will measure not just the specific content students have learned, but how well they have mastered the interpretative, literacy and analytical/conceptual skills that are the foundation of the Common Core standards and the basis of determining college and career readiness. Another way of putting it is that MCAS is primarily a “knowledge-based” test, whereas PARCC is more “performance and evidence-based.” Other important differences are that PARCC will provide teachers with assessment data throughout the year, thereby enabling them to adjust instruction mid-course and students will take the tests on computers rather than pencil and paper.

Q: Tests on computers? We don’t have that kind of technology available in our schools/district. Why would they do this?

A: Today’s students (and tomorrow’s workers) are far more engaged by and need to be able to use technology effectively in both learning and workplace environments. In addition, computer-administered tests will not only increase access for students with disabilities and English language learners, but also significantly shorten the time to analyze the results. Yes, it is true that one of the major challenges for districts will be to both integrate technology into the learning process and ensure the appropriate tools are available to administer the tests. This is where many states are hoping to use Race to the Top dollars to fund necessary upgrades. This means committing to spend the money needed to obtain curriculum materials and the testing and Internet capacity to make it work.

Q: The cost of developing the standards, designing the assessment and training and ensuring aligned practice and technology seems overwhelming. Any estimates?

A: One estimate calls for an overall \$15.8 billion, much of it federal money. Local districts will differ widely in the amount of training and technology that will be needed, although Massachusetts is in a far better position than many other states, having already implemented many of the same or similar standards. However, even in Massachusetts there are large areas where there is no wireless Internet access or sufficient technical capacity to administer the system as required.

Q: Is Common Core a national curriculum in disguise that further subverts local control and initiative?

A: Despite what some of its more vocal opponents contend, the Common Core is neither a designated curriculum for schools nor is it intended to dictate what and/or how teachers will teach. The thinking behind the Common Core was to formulate out of the patchwork of state standards a new set of common guidelines and common tests, while allowing local districts the flexibility to be as creative and collaborative as desired in developing curricula and the delivery of it. The assessment—the standardized yardstick—will evaluate how effective are the approaches that different districts adopt.

Q: Despite the fact that the new standards have been enthusiastically endorsed across a wide spectrum of state and education leaders, educators, business community and parents, there seems to be a loud and growing pushback to the upcoming implementation. What is the controversy about?

A: There are many points of principled criticism or skepticism about the Common Core and PARCC. Some question whether a national system of curriculum guidelines and standardized tests undermine local control of schools. Advocates for basic skills worry that mastery of basic skills (rules of grammar, mathematical processes, classical literature, or foreign languages) will decline and yield to a less rigorous system. Skep-

tics always fear how the new program might evolve in the hands of future state or federal administrations. Others wonder if the shift from one system to another will be fair to all students given the enormous diversity of learning styles. In a bitterly partisan political environment, proponents and adversaries of the system confuse the public. In fact, we have no long term research to prove that either MCAS or PARCC will be preferable to the other. Advocates for non-traditional learners wonder whether the system will help them reach their full potential. Will the new system serve kids at economic risk or who are just learning the English language? And advocates for students will always wonder whether the new PARCC data will be used to fulfill a political agenda as much as an academic mission – something that was the basis of wide criticism of the No Child Left Behind programs.

Q: Is it really reasonable to expect that just because the Common Core standards are higher and more demanding that we will be able to muster the will and the resources to help our most challenged and vulnerable students achieve them?

A: Common Core advocates and state academic leaders believe that the new system can bring about improvement. We also believe that the system can be modified and fine-tuned to work more efficiently.

Q: Will the Common Core standards bring about a renaissance in US education and students' ability to think and perform critically and analytically or will it become mired in process and fear of retaliation and go the way of other reform efforts?

A: We anticipate that the new systems will allow teachers and school administrators to find the right balance between basic skill building, critical thinking, and creativity that was missing in the current system that has been criticized for encouraging teachers to “teach to the test.” We believe that promoting critical thinking will help students prepare for college, apprenticeships, military service and successful lives that will require them to adapt and adjust as never before.

Q: What will be the responsibilities of School Committees as we begin implementing the Common Core and administering the PARCC system.

A: The role of the School Committee will take on an added dimension of importance.

For example:

- A characteristic of high performing school committees is that they help educate their communities as well as their students. School Committees can host community forums to educate the public. They can set aside time in meetings to discuss the Common Core and measure how well their students are doing, using the data to make informed decisions about budgets and policy.
- School Committees oversee the collective bargaining process with teachers unions that include educator evaluations. Data from the

PARCC assessment should be among the valuable information to help teachers improve their professional practice of educating children.

- School Committees will evaluate the performance of the school superintendents as they implement the new system, lead the principals and teachers who will do the work in the classroom, and report to the community. A diligent committee will ensure that their chief executive makes the system work effectively.
- School Committees should monitor the success and efficiency of the new system as one of its "due diligence" obligations to make sure that the public's tax dollars are spent appropriately and wisely.
- As advocates for students, School Committees will monitor academic achievement and determine how the systems affect the social and emotional well-being of the children they serve.

For more information

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