

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) formally began in June 2009 as a collaborative effort among nearly all of the U.S. states and territories. Most have since adopted these standards in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) and joined a Consortium of states to develop and implement common assessments. Why are so many states transitioning to shared standards and assessments? What do they hope to gain? And how much flexibility will they retain to customize these shared standards and assessments for their constituencies? This briefing document explores these questions.

States' Rationale for the Common Core State Standards Initiative

In response to growing demand among their members, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) agreed in 2009 to coordinate a state-led, voluntary effort to develop core academic standards in ELA and mathematics. Initial publications cited the following problems as drivers of the initiative¹:

- Disparate standards across states (There is strong evidence of significant differences in academic expectations set by states.);
- Student mobility, which exacerbates the problem of disparate standards across states;
- Changes in the set of skills required for current and emerging jobs; and
- Increasing global competition for existing jobs.

One year later, after public comment, reviews and revisions, the final Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were released. Since then, **45 states², the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have formally adopted these voluntary standards**, but there are certain to be challenges to sustaining the connections and collaboration among states over time.

As required by the CCSSI, these states agreed to adopt the complete set of the CCSS in ELA and mathematics and may augment them with state-specific standards, provided that the CCSS comprise at least 85 percent of the total.

The CCSSI recognized that common standards were a critical – but insufficient – lever for achieving its goal of preparing all students to graduate from high school with the skills needed in college and the workforce. The CCSSI also called for the development of³:

Standards Within Adopting States

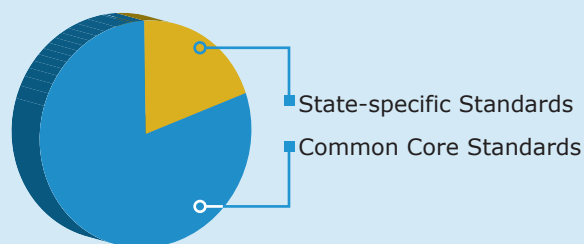


Figure 1

- **tools and resources for educators** to adjust their classroom practices;
- **instructional materials** aligned to the standards;
- **assessments** to measure and report on student progress against these standards; and
- the pursuit of **federal, state and district policies** to ensure alignment.

The CCSSI did not call for, nor does it support a “national curriculum.” The common standards were designed to identify the most essential skills and knowledge students need, but not *how* students acquire them. **Oversight of curricular matters will continue to be the prerogative of the individual states.**

States' Initiative to Create Multi-State Assessment Consortia

In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education announced a competitive grant program to develop new assessment systems by Consortia of 15 or more states. The **grant criteria reflected demands policymakers, parents and educators have cited** for several years, including⁴:

- prompt return of student-level results;
- information that helps teachers refine instruction;

¹ National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. “Common Core State Standards Initiative.” www.corestandards.org/assets/Common-Core-State-Standards-March-2010.ppt. March 2010.

² This count includes Minnesota, which adopted the CCSS in ELA only.

³ Ibid.

⁴ USED. *Race to the Top Assessment Program Notice Inviting Applications*. U.S. Federal Register, April 9, 2010.

- results that measure student performance and growth over time (to enable evaluation of teacher and principal effectiveness); and
- the incorporation of fair and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and English-language learners.

Two Consortia were funded, and 45 states, along with the District of Columbia, joined one or both of the Consortia as ongoing **voluntary** members.

Obligations, Benefits and Flexibilities for States in an Assessment Consortium

Beginning in the 2014–15 school year, member states **commit to implement the common assessments** as their federally required No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assessments for grades 3–8 and high school in ELA and mathematics. While the Race to the Top Assessment Program funds will pay for the design, development, and piloting of the assessment systems and related tools and supports, the subsequent implementation costs are assumed by the member states. Each state will determine how it will administer the assessments, within parameters set by the Consortium for security and comparability. But states may choose to partner on numerous procurements related to implementation in order to share costs.

One significant cost for some states will be the increased level of technology infrastructure required to support these online assessment and reporting systems. The Consortia are working together to assist states and districts in this transition and in securing the needed delivery requirements.

Through participation in a Consortium, states will **benefit** by:

- realizing potential economies of scale in their assessments, reporting systems, instructional resources and professional development resources, although the cost for any state could be higher than the state’s current system;

Governance

The NGA and CCSSO are developing a governance structure to provide oversight for future activities related to the CCSS to ensure that the CCSSI remains a state-led, state-controlled effort. The assessment Consortia are independent bodies that are governed by boards composed of representatives of member states.

For more information on the assessment designs and work of the Consortia, visit

www.k12center.org.

- identifying and sharing successful strategies for accelerating student learning of these priority skills and competencies; and
- providing a more comprehensive picture of how their students are performing against consistent, internationally benchmarked standards for college and career readiness to their states and the public.

With the exception of a four-state assessment Compact in New England, each state currently holds full decision-making authority for its assessment system. Those that join the Consortia will forfeit much of that autonomy — for those portions of the ELA and mathematics assessments developed by the Consortia — and instead will have a seat on the Consortium’s Governance Board. In the broader arena of educational policy and accountability, however, member states will continue to **retain the independence, flexibility and authority to respond to local needs and priorities.**

- States will retain the right to augment the tests with items that assess state-specific standards (see Figure 1), as well as to report NCLB results and results that include the state-specific items to the public.

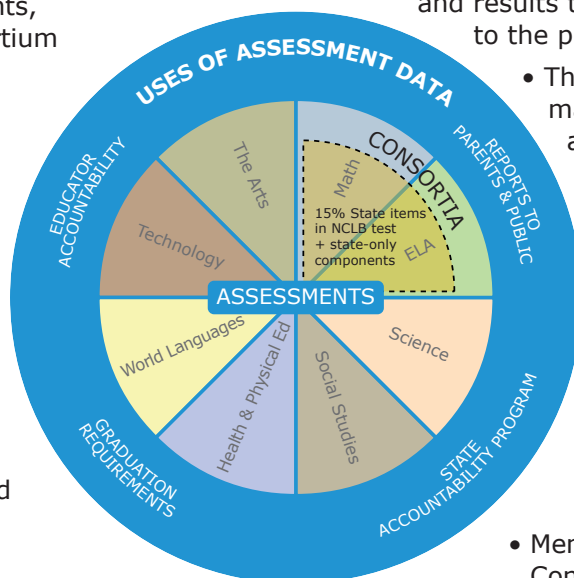


Figure 2

- The common assessments are in mathematics and ELA only; states may administer assessments in additional subjects and at the conclusion of any set of courses. Additionally, the uses of the assessment data within each state are at the purview of the state.
- In addition to the Consortia’s agreed-upon cut score for college readiness in ELA and math, states may establish and report against their own requirements for high school graduation.
- Member states can use state as well as Consortium assessments, as desired, for local accountability requirements.

- States will continue to determine whether and how assessment data are used within educator evaluations and professional advancement systems.

Created by Educational Testing Service (ETS) to forward a larger social mission, the Center for K–12 Assessment & Performance Management at ETS has been given the directive to serve as a catalyst and resource for the improvement of measurement and data systems to enhance student achievement.