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Achieve Finds Common Core of Standards in States

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Washington

States that have worked individually to set rigorous academic standards for high school students have inadvertently subscribed to a “common core” of expectations in English/language arts and mathematics, an analysis by **Achieve** has found.

The apparent agreement among a “critical mass” of states on the kinds of complex knowledge and skills students need to master in those subjects suggests, according to the report, that a state-led effort toward creating common standards is feasible.

“There is a clearly identifiable common core across the states. It’s not that they have identical standards, but there’s a high degree of commonality,” said Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, a Washington-based group governors and business leaders formed to promote rigorous state standards.

“One of the lessons from this work,” he said, “is that if you anchor your standards in the real-world expectations of what students need to succeed in college and the workplace—and those are not state-specific—that ought to lead to larger numbers of states developing a common core of expectations.”

The report, **“Out of Many, One: Toward Rigorous Common Core Standards from the Ground Up,”** released July 31, looks at the content of standards for grades 9-12 in states that joined Achieve’s **American Diploma Project network** shortly after it was formed in 2005. That network now includes 33 states, representing 80 percent of the nation’s public school population.

Those states have worked to align their English/language arts and math standards with the demands of college and the workforce. The new analysis found that of the 12 states that have done so in English/language arts, and the 16 with aligned math standards, most incorporate the broad range of high-level college-readiness skills identified by Achieve.

“The common core reflects the reality of the world—that there is fundamental knowledge in English and mathematics that all graduates must know to succeed and that is not bound by state lines—but the common core also respects the traditional role of state decisionmaking in education,” the report says. “Rigorous state standards anchored in real-world demands can and should drive the rest of the states’ education reform agenda—including graduation requirements, assessments, accountability, and data systems.”

Consistency across states, moreover, could allow partnerships in developing assessments and other tools for helping students meet the standards, Mr. Cohen said.

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Framework Comparisons

Achieve analyzed the standards for secondary English/language arts and math for Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Tennessee, and the math standards for Arizona, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Texas. All those states have aligned their standards in grades 9-12 with the American Diploma Project recommendations.

The state standards were then compared against frameworks in each subject created by Achieve as part of the ADP project to match what experts identified as essential skills for college and work.

In English/language arts, for example, the ADP benchmarks fall into eight categories: language, communication, writing, research, logic, informational text, media, and literature. In addition to such basic skills as grammar, punctuation, and spelling, they cover traditional tasks such as analysis of literature and other texts. The benchmarks also emphasize the need for students to learn how to develop an argument, interpret information from multiple types of texts, and work on team activities.

In math, five categories are covered: number sense and numerical operations; algebra; geometry; data interpretation, statistics and probability; and mathematical reasoning. The benchmarks include computational skills, the ability to solve real-world math problems, use of math models, and use of appropriate techniques to solve them.

The guidelines also require that students learn “the mathematical reasoning inherent in applying geometric properties to solve problems, prove theorems, and perform constructions,” as well as to interpret data and statistics.

Some experts, though, have called for a more coordinated national standards initiative. **The National Association of Secondary School Principals**, for example, recommended this year that a plan for devising such standards be written into the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. (“**Principals’ Group Calls for National Academic Standards and Tests**,” June 11, 2008.)

Lack of Faith

The Reston, Va.-based NASSP is urging Congress to establish an independent panel of educators and scholars to set those standards, and assessments aligned to them.

“I don’t share the same sense of optimism that across the country we’re moving toward common standards in English/language arts and math,” said Gerald N. Tirozzi, the NASSP’s executive director. “I just don’t have faith in the states to reach agreement on these standards individually. I think we’ll still end up with this discrepancy among states.”

A number of experts and organizations have called for a renewed discussion on academic standards over the past several years. While they mostly suggest that the standards would be voluntary, the proposals include providing states with grants or other incentives for adopting them.

Recently, some such proposals have included states aligning their standards with those of top-performing countries around the world as a means of ensuring that students in the United States

In Line on Content

A number of states have aligned their English/language arts and math requirements with select standards recommended by the American Diploma Project.

English/language arts:		Enlarge ⊕
Evaluate the range and quality of evidence used to support or oppose an argument	12	
Apply and adapt the principles of written composition to create coherent media productions	10	
Write an extended research essay (6-10 pages), building on primary and secondary sources	9	
Analyze the moral dilemmas in works of literature, as revealed by characters’ motivation and behavior	9	

Note: Twelve states were reviewed for English/language arts, and 16 for math.

Source: Achieve

can compete with their peers around the globe. ("**America Scouts Overseas to Boost Education Skills,**" April 23, 2008.)

And at a hearing on Capitol Hill last month, mayors and school leaders from Atlanta, Chicago, the District of Columbia, and New York City urged Congress to establish national content standards.

But some observers say that states are best positioned to lead any standards effort, with the American Diploma Project as a first step.

"The only way to really drive these [standards] home and into the classroom is through raising and calibrating grading practices to align with performance expectations, and through statewide assessment," said David S. Spence, the president of the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board. "You might get consensus ... to describe these [national] standards in general content terms, but to get it down into the classroom, only the states have the leverage to do that."

Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, in Washington, agrees, but he said he doesn't see the ADP approach as being at odds with the call for national guidelines. He hopes all the groups will work together to strengthen and clarify academic expectations.

"People, mostly out of frustration, are calling for a solution to the problem [of low achievement and inadequate preparation for college], but they aren't really focusing on how to do it," said Mr. Wilhoit. Through the ADP benchmarks, he added, "we've laid out how you get there."

Achieve is working with states and other groups on finding ways to measure progress toward helping students meet the standards.

But focusing on the classroom is necessary to help students succeed, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement.

"Setting high expectations in state educational standards is an essential first step in improving America's schools," she said. "To reach high standards, there must be a high-quality curriculum, solid professional development, and fair, objective assessments."