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Preserving Local Community Control and the Common Core State Standards

The Center for College & Career Readiness is dedicated to the development of educational processes which result in college and work ready students. We are not advocates or proponents of any specific policy, process, set of standards, or approach. Our work is wholly rooted in the deepest educational and organizational research with demonstrated empirical outcomes.

The Common Core State Standards were developed by the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, with strong support from business organizations like the United States Chamber of Commerce, as a method to achieve the following goals:

- **Common:** Provide a consistent, high quality set of core educational experiences for all students. Inconsistent core schooling has tremendous costs, especially when new students enter a district and have significantly different skill sets. Districts can spend millions of dollars helping students “catch up” to the local educational standards.
- **Core:** Focus the common school experience on highly rigorous thinking and problem solving rooted in real-world problems, resulting in fewer students who fail to graduate, require intervention or remediation, and fewer students who are not skilled or employable within the current economy. The “Core” represents a shift away from policy mandates for content and towards local, classroom-centered rigorous debate and critical exploration of current topics.
- **State:** Preserve the ability of individual states to determine their specific standardized content requirements. States may modify or add content requirements up to 15% of the Core requirements.
- **Standards:** Leverage the millions of dollars spent annually on educational research by widely distributing the best practices for the acceleration of student reading skills especially focused on very complex text, and best practices for the development of student skills in foundational mathematics and real world mathematics problem solving.

Federal Mandates: A Concern

Communities may be concerned at the idea of “Common” standards, believing that the Federal Government is mandating the content taught to their children. There are a few facts to note:

- **The Federal Government's authority over local schools is primarily rooted in Federal Title Funds. Federal funds provide support for minority and poor students, for special needs students, for migrant students and special populations, and for teacher development and innovation. Many Federal funding streams are prohibited from use for the general population of students.**

- **The Federal Government did not create or publish the Common Core State Standards.** The Common Core State Standards were developed by academics, include research funded in part under the administration of George W. Bush (such as the National Math Report, the National Reading Panel, the Reading First Report, the Reading Next Report on Adolescent Literacy, among others), and are published through the partnership of the National Governor’s Association and Council of Chief State School Officers.
- **The Federal Government’s largest, broadest set of curricular requirements is embodied within the No Child Left Behind legislation. Local control of school curriculum content is bounded by the requirements of No Child Left Behind, if those schools and their state are to receive Federal Education Funding. It may be noteworthy that states can receive waivers from the NCLB requirements upon adoption of the Common Core State Standards, resulting in lessened Federal Government regulation.**

The above facts notwithstanding, educational research, policy and standards are complex and can be difficult to understand. As a result, the concept of “Common” may be associated with “Loss of Local Control”.

Actions to Preserve Local Control While Maintaining Rigorous College & Career Ready Classrooms

The following policy and funding-focused actions may be helpful to communities wishing to ensure local control of their school district(s) while also ensuring that their students are able to meet College & Career Readiness standards and assessment requirements.

1. Board of Education (State Level) Resolution

The State Board of Education may approve a policy adopting the [State] College & Career Performance Standards, with local specific content requirements augmenting those found within the “Common Core State Standards”. The policy may support the concept that the State is adopting the best educational practices of the “Common Core” standards, while ensuring that the standards are customized and controlled by their locally elected or appointed state Board of Education.

A modified policy at the State Board of Education level may specifically allow local school districts to adopt “augmentations” to the [State] College & Career Performance Standards, either in specific areas of practice or via adoption of different state approved curriculum.

(We make some specific recommendations below regarding areas of “augmentation”).

2. Board of Education (Local Level) Resolution

Individual school districts may adopt their own set of standards, as long as those standards result in sufficient student academic achievement and the activity of the district is compliant with their State Department of Education mandates. A nationally known best-practice example of this scenario is Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. Gwinnett has long adopted its own “Academic Performance Standards” which include the state standards but which augment those standards with additional, rigorous requirements. Gwinnett has been recognized by the Broad Foundation, among others, as one of the highest performing urban school districts in the United States.

This action provides a direct response to local community concerns while directly seeking to augment and improve the academic requirements and outcomes within the district. (See specific recommendations below.)

3. State and Local Board, or District Administration Resolution: Local College & Career Readiness

At the State Board of Education level, the local Board of Education level, or even within the school administration itself, the stated expectations of college & career ready students may be localized to speak to specific local needs and concerns, by endorsing resolutions or policies and by engaging in partnerships with the local business and college community.

One possible action might be a local school board resolution that “The [Local School District] shall ensure that any and all academic standards supported by local district funds are research-based, represent best practice for the domain of the standard, and are focused upon preparing district students to succeed without remediation in community and national colleges and universities or to find successful employment with local, state, national and international employers.”

Area business and college leaders may be consulted on the policy statement, and perhaps even on specific augmentations to the standards. Local public concerns may be addressed when communities see their local business and college leaders working with, supporting, and providing testimony in support of the local school district’s efforts to achieve College & Career Readiness for local students.

4. Specific Standards-based Adoptions at the State or Local Level

No set of academic standards, whether focused on content or instructional processes or depth of knowledge, are perfect. There has been some debate regarding whether or not the Common Core State Standards are truly “more rigorous” than existing state standards. There has also been concern regarding new methods of teaching mathematics, and a potential decrease in the amount of literature that students are allowed to read.

The following academic benchmarks, instructional practices, and curriculum and assessment elements strongly support College & Career Readiness efforts but are not explicitly noted within the Common Core State Standards. If districts or Boards of Education choose to adopt specific “local standards” to ensure “local control” of the academic experience while maintaining instructional rigor, the following elements are straightforward and, in our opinion, add rigorous requirements beyond the Core standards.

Elements of “Local Core Standards”

- A. District shall measure the reading level of every student at least three times per year and ensure reading skill data is used explicitly in the planning and delivery of instruction.

Many school districts do not currently know the reading abilities of their students, nor do they use reading data to plan curriculum and differentiate instruction. This is a key best practice required for College & Career Ready classrooms and not explicitly required by the Common Core State Standards.

- B. District shall ensure student choice for reading content, research, and performance projects provided that such student choice shall be within an educationally appropriate range for the student.

Student engagement is closely linked with student choice, and College & Career Readiness requires a student be able to identify and make choices independently. As well, given the diversity of student learning styles, this standard of practice helps to ensure that students who may be more verbal or visual are allowed appropriate methods of performance.

- C. District shall ensure students are as proficient when reading literature as they are when reading non-fiction, informational text.

Generally, this will be the case with most students. However, concerns surrounding the growing importance of non-fiction informational text can be mitigated by this local standard which serves to ensure that students’ ability to read literature is not minimized.

- D. District shall ensure that non-fiction, informational content includes information focused on local resources, business, history, employment and careers. (Place-based education)

Place-based education provides greater engagement and relevance for students, especially struggling students, as it draws specifically on shared background knowledge. It is also an effective method of community engagement, and can lead to greater local involvement in school curriculum.

- E. District teachers shall ensure student proficiency in the use of vocabulary beyond spelling alone, by ensuring that required vocabulary is spoken aloud, discussed meaningfully, and used in different contexts with different meanings in written and spoken assignments.

The Core standards seek to address the need for increased direct vocabulary instruction and mastery. However, the standards do not specifically require that teachers execute best practices for vocabulary instruction. This standard is a counterpart for teacher expectations and supports the Core requirements for student vocabulary acquisition.

- F. District shall ensure that students are fluent in the basics of mathematics by the end of fifth grade, specifically fluent use of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and the use of fractions, as these skills are the foundational skills for College & Career Ready algebra.

The Core standards are structured to achieve a similar goal but do not state the goal explicitly. This benchmark may reassure communities that student basic math skills will be the centerpiece of district math curriculum.

- G. District shall ensure that math curriculum is research-based, centered around best practices for instruction, and includes direct instruction of basic math skills to a level of fluency along with mastery of mathematics within real-world applications including application in local businesses.

The Math Practices contained within the Core standards can be a source of concern for communities. They are difficult to understand, and represent a significant departure from traditional math instruction. This statement of policy may reassure concerned communities that their local district will only implement curricula that is research-based and further reassure communities that direct instruction in basic math skills will not be minimized. Moreover, the addition of a focus on application in local businesses further supports workforce development and career readiness goals.

- H. District shall ensure that at least two of seven class periods within each grade in High School are comprised of English, Literature, World Languages or Writing.

The Core standards set forth a benchmark of 30% literary text use across the school day. However, many communities are concerned that traditional, "classic" texts and the Western core literature reading lists may be overlooked or minimized by Common Core State Standards. This benchmark may reassure communities that traditional emphasis on English, Literature, Language and Writing will be maintained within the local district.

- I. District shall adopt a Writing Requirement for each grade level which includes specifically the requirements for proficiency as set forth in the most recent NAEP assessments. Each grade level shall have an End of Grade Writing Project which shall include a focus on local / area / state history, business and economy, noteworthy people such as community leaders, local / area / state colleges or local / area / state careers.

In 2011, only 27 percent of American students scored at a level of proficient or above on the NAEP. Success on next generation assessments which seek to measure student proficiency in thinking and application rests strongly on the student's ability to write. This benchmark is strongly recommended as an additional, more rigorous requirement to guide district efforts in augmenting student writing performance.

- J. District shall create and/or adopt, as part of its Local Core Curriculum, a local curriculum component which meets the highest depth of knowledge requirements while including a focus on local business, history, economy, leadership and careers. District shall engage local community organizations, businesses and individuals to contribute to the curriculum, which may be used throughout the Core disciplines of English / Language Arts, History and Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science.

Place-based education provides greater engagement and relevance for students, especially struggling students, as it draws specifically on shared background knowledge. It is also an effective method of community engagement, and can lead to greater local involvement in school curriculum.

- K. Locally (elected or appointed) school board members shall have oversight of purchasing any curriculum, instruction or assessment materials including those which include “Common Core”, “Local Core”, or any other educational standards. District shall ensure that curriculum materials are factually correct, utilize only research-based methods of instruction, and meet the highest requirements for depth of knowledge and academic rigor.

Local control of curriculum content, instructional materials, and educational approaches rests with the control of expenditure as approved by the Board of Education. This statement of policy may reassure communities that their local community leadership on the Board of Education has the final word when approving curriculum and other materials.

- L. District shall not purchase nor otherwise implement curriculum, instructional techniques, nor assessments which present as fact any one political viewpoint. Scientific understandings as supported by the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of the Arts and Sciences as well as scientific findings reported in widely accepted, peer-reviewed journals shall be presented as the best current understandings of the physical world. Across all disciplines, independent thinking and debate, including the freedom to represent minority opinions, shall be preserved and fostered without penalty. District shall ensure that classroom teachers foster active freedom of discussion and debate, and do not represent their own personal opinions as “fact” or “science”.

College & Career Readiness requires the active, free flowing debate of ideas and the development of students who can think independently and evaluate the evidence of arguments. This statement of policy may reassure community members who are concerned that their ideas and those of their students may lead to persecution in the classroom. Moreover, this statement of policy may reassure communities where the notion of “Common” within the Common Core State Standards is a concern, and specifically reassure those communities with a concern about “national curriculum” or a lack of freedom of thought.

The Center for College & Career Readiness is a 501(C)3 research and training organization dedicated to the development of students P-20 with the skills, experience and interests to power the global economy for the next century. We are committed to education that works for our communities, our families, and most importantly for our students.

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