Common Core State Standards Assessments

Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction and summary

The Common Core State Standards, or CCSS, represent a potential reboot for standards-based reform—an opportunity to address some of the design flaws that have diminished the policy's effectiveness in the past. This new set of standards can replace the various state benchmarks for learning that have dominated K-12 education policy in the United States for at least two decades. These new content standards, which clearly detail the knowledge and skills that all students should possess in mathematics and English language arts, or ELA, are intended to be supported with aligned assessments that reinforce the content messages of the standards and provide evidence of student mastery. When tied with consequential accountability, the CCSS and assessments can lead to improved instruction and, subsequently, improved student learning. This theory of change is intuitively appealing, and there is evidence of success at achieving intended effects on teachers' instruction[1] and student performance, including both test scores[2] and longer-range outcomes.[3]

The CCSS were created in response to the shortcomings of No Child Left Behind-era standards and assessments. Among those failings were the poor quality of content standards[4] and assessments[5] and the variability in content expectations[6] and proficiency targets[7] across states, as well as concerns related to the economic competitiveness of the nation's future workforce. The CCSS in mathematics and ELA were developed in 2009 by governors and chief state school officers in association with educators and researchers. The standards that they drafted were rapidly adopted in 45 states and the District of Columbia. In addition, two state consortia—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC— were created to develop new assessments aligned to the new standards.

In general, there is a good deal of enthusiasm for both the CCSS and the assessments forthcoming from the two consortia. Both major teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have endorsed the standards, and polls suggest that teachers are generally optimistic about the potential effects of the standards.[8] Researchers have released a number of studies that have indicated that the standards are of higher quality than most of the state standards they replaced,[9] more coherent from grade to grade than prior

standards,[10] and capture essential mathematics and ELA content.[11] While the PARCC and SBAC tests have not yet been released, both consortia are planning several developments, discussed throughout this report, that would represent improvements over prior state achievement tests.

Despite the keenness for the CCSS and forthcoming tests, there are a number of likely challenges to the new standards and assessment systems. The purpose of this report is to outline some of these key challenges and offer suggestions for state and federal policymakers to mitigate them. The assessment challenges addressed in this paper pertain to the following seven areas:

- **Higher proficiency levels.** Proficiency level cutoffs on the new assessments will be more challenging than those under the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB. These higher proficiency cuts will result in more students failing than under prior assessments.

- **Technology upgrades.** The new assessments emerging from both consortia will require a significant investment in new computer technology. This will prove costly, especially in an era of ever-tightening district budgets.

- **Computer scoring.** New constructed-response items and performance tasks will require either human or computer scoring. Computer scoring will require technological advancement, and there are legitimate questions as to whether computer scoring will be able to assess the full quality of student responses to more ambitious tasks.

- **Content coverage.** New assessments will need do a better job sampling from the full domain of the standards—in other words, cover the full range of standards content, rather than predictably focusing on certain objectives and ignoring others. While the consortia have stated plans to solve this problem, it will be a tall order given the poor quality of prior tests.

- **Time investments.** The new assessments may require somewhat more time to take than prior state tests. While the time increase is relatively marginal, when combined with the general growth of assessment time, this may lead to concern regarding overtesting.

- **Validating uses for expanded evaluation.** Owing to the NCLB waivers, results from the new assessments are to be used for an increasingly wide array of purposes, including evaluating educators. These new uses will require new validity and reliability evidence.

- **Rollout coherence.** The new accountability systems developed through the waivers are also being implemented at the same time as the new assessments, and technical issues with the timing of the new assessments may complicate their rollout.

If the standards and assessments are to produce desired improvements in student outcomes, it is essential that policymakers and the developers of the CCSS assessments attend to the above seven challenges. To that end, this report offers several recommendations for assessment and accountability systems in the CCSS era. These recommendations include:

- Test developers in the consortia must put assessment quality and alignment issues front and center. This means ensuring the tests capture the full domain of the standards, maintain the cognitive demand level of the standards content, and include a wide variety of high-quality items.

- State and district policymakers promoting new uses for assessment data must provide reliability and validity evidence that supports their intended uses to ensure that appropriate decisions are made based on assessment data.

- To head off concerns about likely decreasing proficiency rates, actors at multiple levels—including state and district policymakers, researchers, educators, and test developers—must be proactive in explaining the new proficiency standards and why they matter.

- The federal government, states, and districts must create and implement more thoughtful teacher- and school-accountability systems that minimize the pervasive negative incentives seen under NCLB.

- The federal government must encourage assessment quality in several areas, including giving the consortia the freedom to measure proficiency outside of grade level and refining the peer-review guidance used to evaluate assessments.

In short, the proposed recommendations include both political and technical activities on the part of test developers, state and district policymakers and leaders, federal policymakers, and CCSS assessment consortia members. If met, these recommendations can help quell many of the concerns about the CCSS, new assessments, and school- and teacher-accountability systems.

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