

## Staying the Course: Authorizers and the Common Core

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is committed to helping authorizers effectively manage the challenges they face as their states and the schools they authorize move forward with implementation of the Common Core. This brief and the others in our new *Staying the Course* series are intended to offer authorizers useful guidance about how to fulfill their responsibilities to students, schools, and the public in the face of substantial, rapid change. While the new standards are sure to alter public education in deep and lasting ways, the critical work of authorizing will remain the same. By being thoughtful and strategic, by upholding high standards for schools, and by putting the interests of students above all else, authorizers can meet and overcome the challenges ahead.

Few changes in policy and practice will have a greater impact on public education in the United States over the next decade than the development, implementation, and assessment of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In every state where the standards are adopted, students, educators, schools, districts, and state departments of education will experience the impact of these new standards on almost every aspect of their work. From curriculum to assessment, from teacher evaluation to school accountability, the CCSS will shape the future of public education practice in far-reaching ways.

This impact will be no less significant for charter schools and authorizers. The flexibility that charter schools have over such matters as finances, instructional materials, content delivery, human capital, and learning time may allow them to innovate in implementation in ways that district-managed schools are not usually allowed. At the same time, the smaller average size of charter schools and the direct accountability they face for their performance are likely to present special challenges in implementing the Common Core.

Charter school authorizers will face challenges and opportunities, as well. Because authorizers do not operate charter schools, mandate curriculum choices, or decide what or how content is taught, they will not be supervising classroom-level implementation in the same way as school districts. Yet as the entities responsible for promoting both accountability and school autonomy, authorizers may find themselves walking a Common Core tightrope.



## Common Learning Standards

**The Common Core State Standards** (CCSS) are national K-12 content standards developed as a joint initiative of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA). CCSS is not a curriculum (i.e., day-to-day instructional content) but rather a set of broad learning standards to which educators are expected to align their curriculum and assessments. As learning standards, the CCSS state the knowledge and skills students should have at certain grade levels in various subject areas. **“To be effective in improving education and getting all students ready for college, workforce training, and life, the Standards must be partnered with a content-rich curriculum and robust assessments, both aligned to the Standards.”**

The CCSS are **touted as “internationally benchmarked K–12 academic standards** for mathematics and English language arts and literacy [that] establish what students are expected to have learned when they graduate from high school and enter postsecondary education or the workplace.”

**“To be effective in improving education and getting all students ready for college, workforce training, and life, the Standards must be partnered with a content-rich curriculum and robust assessments, both aligned to the Standards.”**

– Common Core State Standards Initiative

Since the CCSS were released in 2010, 45, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. Territories have adopted the standards. Also since 2010, the U.S. Department of Education has made grants to several groups of states working in parallel to develop “next generation” data and assessment systems. The two major state groups are the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced). These consortia are **separately developing assessments** aligned with the CCSS. These assessments are scheduled for use by states beginning in the 2014-15 school year.

**PARCC and Smarter Balanced are both described as “next generation”** assessments because they aspire to be performance-based. Accordingly, they will **“require students to demonstrate** higher-order thinking, through problem-solving, essay-writing, and

research projects, as opposed to the multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank tests of the past.” Key differences between the two consortia’s approaches include the grades tested and the frequency of assessments, and, perhaps most significantly, how they approach assessment of learning. Smarter Balanced is using adaptive technology by which a test adjusts the difficulty of its questions in response to a student’s real-time performance, whereas PARCC has decided to maintain consistent difficulty levels for its tests. Proponents of adaptive testing argue that it provides a more accurate assessment of what a student knows than do fixed-level tests that assess only whether a student is above or below a particular proficiency level. Proponents of fixed-level assessment argue that it is precisely this focus on whether students are meeting standards that is their strength.

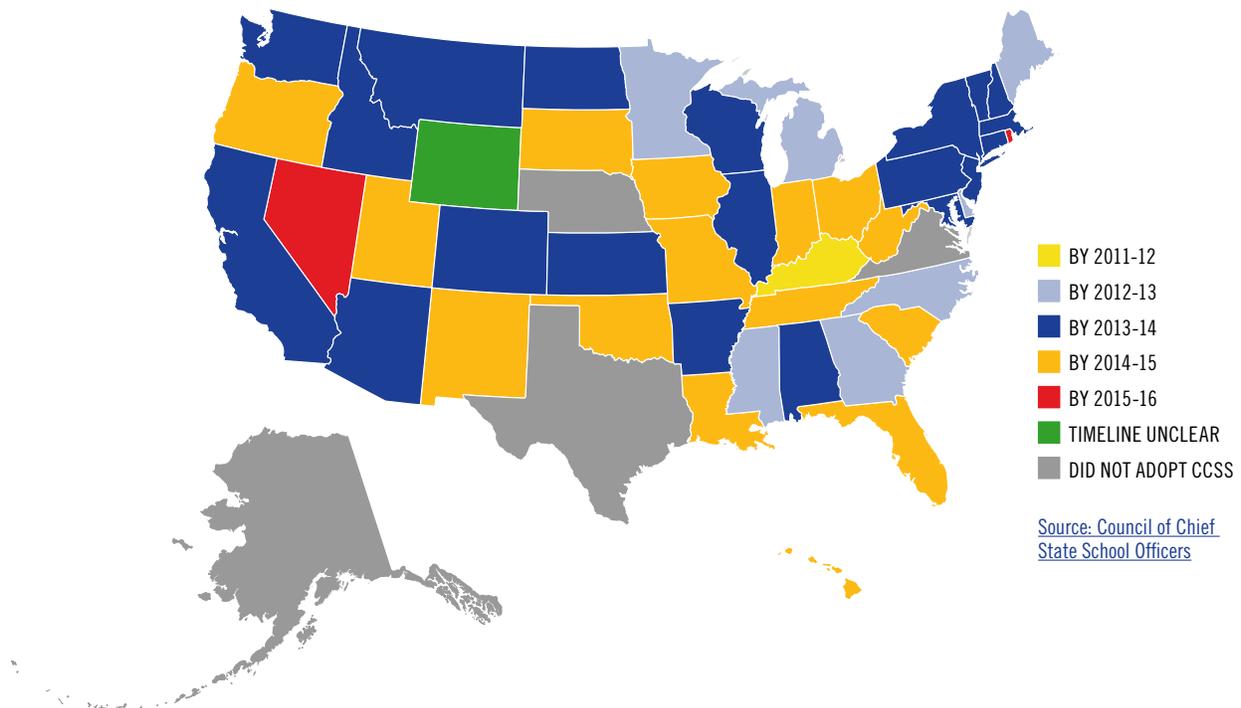
As of this writing, 22 states belong to Smarter Balanced, while 19 are part of PARCC. Six states (Alabama, Colorado, Kentucky, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina) are members of both consortia and are waiting to see the results of each consortium’s work before deciding which tests to adopt.

## Implementation Timing

Although the Common Core standards were released in 2010, their implementation will take at least the next three to five years and is likely to vary greatly from state to state, district to district, and school to school. States, districts, and individual charter schools will need to modify, redesign, or adopt new curricula that are aligned with the standards. States will also need to select one of the assessment systems designed by the testing consortia or develop their own. Existing state accountability systems for schools and for teacher evaluation may also need to be adjusted to account for changes to the testing regime.

A few states, such as Kentucky and New York, have already begun using new CCSS-aligned tests, but the vast majority of states are likely to wait for the two testing consortia to complete their work. PARCC and Smarter Balanced both plan to have assessments ready for use by states in time for the 2014-15 school year. For the 2013-14 school year, most states are likely to continue using their existing standards and assessments. Some states may choose to administer both sets of tests during a transition year, although the U.S. Department of Education recently announced that this was not mandatory.

## The Common Core State Standards: Development, Adoption, and Implementation



### Calls for an Accountability Moratorium

With at least an entire school year until PARCC and Smarter Balanced complete their work on new assessments, it is unclear how federal and state policy makers will handle accountability decision making between now and whenever full implementation is complete. Critics of the entire Common Core project appear to be seizing on this uncertainty to revive their attacks, and may be gaining some traction. The five states that have not adopted the standards are Alaska, Nebraska, Minnesota, Texas, and Virginia. Over the past year there have been efforts in approximately a dozen states that have adopted the standards to pull out of the CCSS coalition altogether or slow down implementation. There have also been calls by some supporters of the CCSS—most notably, [Josh Starr](#), superintendent of schools for Montgomery County, Maryland; [Randi Weingarten](#), president of the American Federation of Teachers; and [Dennis Van Roekel](#), president of the National Education Association—to impose a moratorium or a “pause” on any accountability consequences that flow from performance on the new tests.

According to Weingarten, “Tests should be decoupled from decisions that could unfairly hurt students, schools,

“We will not relax or delay our urgency for creating better teacher, principal, school, and district accountability systems as we implement more rigorous standards.” – *Chiefs for Change*

and teachers” until “states and districts work with educators to develop clear tasks and a clear timeline” for CCSS implementation. Those supporting a moratorium on “stakes” during this undefined transition period argue that the standards and accompanying assessments are new and more rigorous than are currently in place; that states have not planned sufficiently for implementation; and that teachers have not been given adequate time, training, or support to implement the standards. Advocates of an accountability moratorium point to Kentucky, which last year became the first state to use tests aligned with the CCSS and where scores plummeted (as predicted). Louisiana began implementing CCSS-aligned assessments this year, but did not see the same dip. Results in New York State are pending.

Although Common Core opponents are unlikely to be able to stop the initiative in its tracks, it is less clear how federal

and state policy makers and education leaders will respond to calls for an accountability moratorium. Not surprisingly, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), one of the co-sponsors of the CCSS initiative, rejects the moratorium idea, but says it “remain[s] committed to being thoughtful about how we evaluate teachers and use test results in school consequences.” The reform-minded [Chiefs for Change group has been more forceful in its rejection of such calls](#), as have some other prominent organizations that promote standards-based accountability for teachers and schools, such as [The New Teacher Project](#) and [Stand for Children](#).

“The Common Core does what forward-thinking educators have been screaming about for years – increase rigor, focus on critical thinking, align a curriculum from K-12 to college-ready standards, focus on fewer standards in more depth. I’m anticipating that when the test results come out, Achievement First students (like students throughout the state) will have some pretty suboptimal results. You will not hear me or other AF leaders blame the test, complain that we needed more time, or spend one minute of my energy on that topic...

“...Schools need internal, curriculum-aligned measures to guide them, but they also need the clarity and accountability that comes from being able to see how their students stack up against others across the state (and country) and how much they’ve learned in the past year. The Common Core will shine even more light on the insidious achievement gap in our country, and I think it will also expose that even in our wealthiest areas and schools, our students are not being pushed to the level of rigor that they need and deserve...

“...No excuses. No blaming the test. No saying we needed more time.”

– [Doug McCurry](#), Co-CEO and superintendent, Achievement First

Doug McCurry, co-CEO and superintendent of the Northeast regional charter network Achievement First, [recently offered a full-throated defense of the Common Core and the newly aligned tests](#), a version of which Connecticut piloted this spring. McCurry argues that while he and his colleagues expect to see their schools’ scores drop under the new assessments, that is no reason for educators to complain that the tests are too hard or that the expectations are too high -- or to attack the Common Core itself. Instead, he says, educators should embrace the CCSS because it “does what forward-thinking educators have been screaming about for years – increase rigor, focus on critical thinking, align a curriculum from K-12 to college-ready standards, and focuses on fewer standards in more depth.”

The U.S. Department of Education [has been more circumspect about what to expect during the transition period](#), particularly with respect to accountability for schools, recently stating that “when the two consortia roll out their new assessments in the 2014-15 school year, they will be works-in-progress” and that it “fully expects some schedule adjustments and technical glitches” while states and districts “improve implementation as they learn from pilots and field tests.” With respect to state-mandated teacher evaluation during the transition, the [Department has announced](#) that it will consider requests from states that received waivers from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to postpone using student assessment data in making personnel decisions until the 2016-17 school year.

## Potential Impacts for Charter Schools and Authorizers

The potential impacts of Common Core implementation on charter schools are likely to vary greatly by state, and will depend on such factors as the amount of flexibility a state gives its charter schools in adopting aligned curricula; whether or not charter teachers are evaluated under a state-level evaluation system using assessment data; and the degree of support states provide to assist with implementation. Like all school districts, charter schools will have to bear the cost of developing or purchasing new curriculum and instructional materials and the cost of training teachers on the new standards and materials.

Charter schools will also be judged on the results of whatever new assessment system their state selects

## Key Questions for Authorizers

Implementation of the Common Core and the accompanying assessments will have significant implications for all K-12 educators, including charter schools, and raises difficult questions for state policy makers, schools, and authorizers. For authorizers in particular, these questions include:

- What is my state's timeline for implementation of CCSS and the new assessments?
- What is my role as an authorizer in CCSS implementation?
- How do my state's implementation requirements apply to charter schools?
- Does my state have a federal accountability waiver? If so, how does it impact implementation?
- Are charter schools required to participate in my state's teacher evaluation system? How will this be handled during CCSS implementation?
- Is my state providing charter schools the same guidance, support, and resources for implementation that it provides to other public schools?
- What are the implications for charter school performance standards and for existing charter school performance contracts?
- Is my state adjusting its accountability system during the transition to new standards and new assessments? How will this affect evaluation of charter school performance?
- Is my state planning any kind of "pause" on high-stakes accountability until after implementation is complete?
- What, if any, adjustments need to be made to my system for evaluating school performance?
- How can I maintain strong accountability, especially for the lowest-performing schools, during the transition to CCSS?

and may see their results change under the new system – in some cases, dramatically. It is not clear what the magnitude of these changes will be, particularly for schools that are performing relatively well under their state’s current assessments, but schools will need to manage expectations and respond to any significant changes.

**We cannot allow the transition to the Common Core to be a break from accountability, especially for the lowest-performing schools.**

**NACSA urges all charter school authorizers, as well as federal and state policy makers, to stay the course on accountability.**

Charter schools that are Local Education Agencies (LEA) are likely to face different challenges from those schools that are part of a district LEA. Charter schools that are their own LEAs are likely to be treated similarly to districts by their state education agencies and so may be subject to the same requirements as districts, but are also more likely to receive similar resources and support from the state, whereas charter schools that are part of a district LEA must rely on the district to pass through resources.

From one standpoint, nothing fundamental is changing here. Charter schools will continue to be subject to whatever standards their states adopt and authorizers will be responsible for enforcing their state’s new accountability system, just as they are responsible for enforcing the current one. However, authorizers do need to ensure that charter schools receive the same resources and support as all other schools in the state for implementation. There will also be new duties for authorizers that serve as the LEA for their schools, because most state-level implementation resources, support, and compliance monitoring will flow through LEAs.

The central implementation issue for authorizers is whether and how the new standards and tests will affect their approach to charter accountability, both during initial implementation and over the long term. The extent of this impact will depend on how state and federal policy makers decide to handle accountability decision making, including performance-based school

closures, during the period just prior to and immediately following the first widespread use of the new assessments in the 2014-15 school year. Almost all state accountability systems use multiple years of data when calculating performance ratings, so the introduction of a new assessment presents the challenge of how to calculate a benchmark with outcomes from two different sets of assessments, based on two sets of standards.

## **Staying the Course: Planning Ahead**

The first years of implementing the new CCSS-aligned assessments will bring a transition from one set of performance metrics and targets to another. This transition will require smart policy, thoughtful problem solving, and sensible flexibility to ensure that schools are held accountable fairly and reasonably. Schools should never face sanctions arbitrarily or in ways that ignore their record of performance over time.

At the same time, we cannot forget that schools that have already been failing to provide a quality education to their students year after year, under current standards and assessments, should not be allowed to continue to fail their students under the higher standards and better assessments that the CCSS promise to bring. Schools that were failing their students before the Common Core, schools that continue to fail during the transition, and schools that fail after implementation are failing schools and should be closed.

NACSA is committed to advancing excellence and accountability in the charter school sector and to increasing the number of high-quality charter schools across the nation. We need thoughtful implementation of the new standards and assessments, but we cannot allow the transition to the Common Core to be a break from accountability, especially for the lowest-performing schools.

NACSA urges all charter school authorizers, as well as federal and state policy makers, to stay the course on accountability.

In 2015, most charter schools and authorizers will begin receiving test results from the Common Core-aligned assessments. By acting now, authorizers, charter schools, education officials, and policy makers can develop practical strategies to maintain accountability in 2015 and beyond.

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NACSA recommends that every charter authorizer take the initiative now to plan for this transition by:

1. Assigning a capable staff person to manage CCSS implementation challenges;
2. Working closely with its State Education Agency (SEA) to be fully informed on Common Core implementation developments, to inform the SEA of how its actions affect charter schools, and to ensure that charter schools receive the same kinds of Common Core resources and support as all public schools; and
3. Working with charter schools to develop responsible methods for reporting, evaluating, and acting on charter school performance results in 2015 and beyond.

The transition to the Common Core will create challenges for everyone in public education, including charter schools and charter school authorizers. With thoughtful planning and careful implementation, these challenges can be met and overcome. Through this *Staying the Course* series and other avenues, NACSA stands ready to help authorizers navigate successful transition to the Common Core and its higher expectations for all students.

### About this Issue Brief

This Issue Brief is the first in NACSA's new series, *Staying the Course*, which provides guidance to authorizers in navigating the challenges presented by implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This brief provides an introduction to the CCSS and the accompanying new assessments, and an overview of the challenges that authorizers will face in maintaining strong accountability, especially for their lowest-performing schools, as their states implement new content standards and aligned assessments. Future Issue Briefs in this series will help authorizers understand the new assessment systems being developed to evaluate school performance under the new standards; strategies for promoting equity and autonomy for charter schools during implementation; and strategies for managing accountability during the transition to new assessments.

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NACSA develops quality authorizing environments that lead to a greater number of quality charter schools. Learn more about NACSA at [www.qualitycharters.org](http://www.qualitycharters.org).

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