

THE IMPACT OF COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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Abstract

This brief will examine the alignment of current state standards and the newly created Common Core State Standards. The research included in the preparation of this brief spanned approximately 15 years. While there is research that was found that supports a high level of state standards and the Common Core, the preponderance of the research utilized identifies that there is a weak link to state standards and their own assessment practices and that there is even a weaker link to the Common Core State Standards. Research finds that the need for alignment among standards, assessments, and instructional practices needs to be high in order for improve student achievement. The lack of alignment provides a gap in the structure of the educational framework. The research provided is limited as there has not been ample time to gather and investigate the findings from the implementation of the Common Core State Standards as they were only created in June of 2010.

Research Topic

Is the Common Core State Standards aligned to State Standards and what impact will the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have on state and local curriculum?

Introduction

The primary purpose underlying standards-based reform, the largest K-12 education policy of the past 20 years, is coherence. Smith and O'Day's (1991) description of systemic reform identifies instructional coherence as a necessary component for wide-scale educational change. In that vision, coherence referred to rigorous curriculum frameworks linked to instructional practices aligned to assessments of student learning (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Through No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states have adopted their own state standards, created state level assessments linked to the state standards, and believed that teacher instruction has matched the intended standards and assessments. This brief was created to research the alignment of current state standards to the newly written CCSS and identify the impact the alignment or misalignment may have on curriculum practices.

Standards based reform has created the need to focus on understanding the intended curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the learned curriculum – all of which impact student outcomes (Cobb & Jackson 2011a; Polikoff, Porter, & Smithson, 2011; Porter & Smithson, 2001;). Porter and Smith (2001) report evidence that education policies have changed practices in desirable ways. However, the newly written Common Core State Standards represent considerable changes from what states currently expect in their standards and assessments. The Common Core standards are somewhat more focused in mathematics but not in English Language Arts. They are different from the

standards of countries with higher student achievement, and they are different from what U.S. teachers report they are currently teaching. The focus of the depth and the breadth of the standards are different (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011a). Adoption of the CCSS standards will represent considerable change, especially for states and local districts (Porter et al., 2011a).

The CCSS will bring with it many changes in standards, curricular alignment, and of course assessments. However, according to Lane (2004) in the context of large-scale testing programs within the current climate, the focus has shifted from ensuring that assessments are measuring meaningful aspects of thinking to ensuring that accountability programs are in place. Teachers are ultimately responsible for what students learn. They decide how much is taught, at what pace, and using what materials. Officials hope that teachers are following the prescribed curriculum, which is intended to include the standards. As states created standards and districts adopted state standards an assumption that staff development followed and guided teachers' instruction was widely held. However, "some claim teachers teach what is in the textbook; others claim teachers teach what is tested" (Porter, 2002, p. 3). The research included in this brief primarily focused on the alignment studies conducted throughout the past ten years. The studies investigated the alignment between standards, assessments, and curriculum or instruction. Research and studies included in this brief began during the beginning of the standards based reform efforts and have continued throughout the implementation and adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

Findings

Standards Alignment

Through Porter, Cobb, and Polikoff's research, it was clearly identified that further investigations need to be conducted to identify current states' standards and their alignment to the Common Core State Standards and implications of the misalignment on instruction and assessment results. The work done to investigate alignment is important, according to research, in determining the validity of assessments and their connection to the standards. Without researched alignment accountability measures are effectively useless in their ability to identify strengths and weaknesses of states and their teaching practices (Cobb et al., 2011a; Polikoff et al., 2011; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011b; Porter, Polikoff, Zeidner, & Smithson, 2008). "Large-scale assessments can signal important goals for educators and students to pursue, which can lead to a positive impact on instruction and learning, but they need to be coupled with effective uses of classroom assessments to promote student learning" (Lane, 2004, p. 13). No study to date has directly compared the three primary alignment indices, and such a study would provide a majority contribution to the understanding of alignment. More work must be done on methods of developing aligned assessments (Polikoff et al., 2011).

The 2008 research indicated that instruction in 25 states, was in general, no more aligned to an individual state's test than it was aligned to tests of other states, suggesting that standards-based reform has not yet brought instruction into alignment. States will not have alignment any tighter with the Common Core State Standards than they did with their own state created standards unless more work is done, beginning with teachers (Porter & Smithson, 2001; Porter et al. 2008; Porter et al. 2011a). The misalignment of

current state standards, assessments, and instruction will continue to cause disconnect within accountability and reporting. In Washington State, a two-year study was conducted to identify relationships between curriculum, teaching, and assessment practices. The study did not detect any relationships between curriculum emphases, teaching practice, or educators' beliefs and school-level scores (Stecher, Chun, & Educational Resources Information Center, 2001). Even though Washington State was one of the first states to adopt the Common Core State Standards, the results of the study show that the CCSS will in fact be a major shift in both English Language Arts and mathematics. The shift from state standards to CCSS has been slow and methodical.

Curriculum Impact

Given that the Common Core State Standards reform and accountability systems are intended to provide challenging content to all students, additional studies examining the impact of the assessments on instruction and student learning are needed (Polikoff et al., 2011; Porter et al., 2008). Some states have standards that are much more focused than the CCSS and some states' standards are less focused. The CCSS may be an attempt to bring all of the states to the middle. According to Porter (2011), the CCSS are not more focused in the call for content that students should learn and teachers should teach. Conclusions of the studies involving the alignment of state standards to assessment practices included the need for additional research and the notion that researchers need to use similar models when collecting and analyzing the data to make accurate conclusions (Porter, 2002).

The 2008 results indicate that the standards and assessment in the 25 observed states are not as well aligned as they could be or were intended. Furthermore, it is

important to investigate the effects of standards and assessments on teachers' instruction. Few, if any, studies have investigated the ways teachers have modified the content of their instruction without simply asking teachers whether their instruction was aligned to standards (Polikoff et al., 2011). To have assessments not aligned to the standards that are the foundation of the U.S. curriculum is unfair to teachers and students.

As the movement toward common core national standards becomes more prevalent, developing assessments that can provide information on progress toward achievement is of paramount importance. The research described suggests that there is some distance to go toward achieving the common sense goal of fair, aligned assessments. (Polikoff et al., 2011). The true test for alignment is the improvement of student achievement as described by expectations. Aligned assessments are needed to show that students are meeting the expectations as stated in the standards, but the measurement of the attainment of standards can only be done using the assessments (Webb, 2007).

Implications for MOEC

Accountability systems are being implemented to improve instruction and student learning. The use of these systems provides an opportunity to evaluate whether assessments are grounded in theories and models of student cognition, and to assess the knowledge and skills that are valued (Lane, 2004). Currently, the state of Nebraska is designing an accountability system, Nebraska Performance Accountability System (NePAS). The system will use state data including: NeSA – Reading, Math, Science, and Writing scores, graduation rates, a growth model, and a few other pieces of data yet to be agreed upon; to measure the effectiveness of local districts, individual buildings,

and possibly individual teachers. NePAS is linked to the Nebraska Standards. These standards have are not aligned to the standards of the Common Core. Iowa has adopted the Common Core State Standards and as members of Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium, continued conversations regarding the impact of assessment results with all stakeholders groups is important. A continued understanding of the content of the CCSS, implication for the adoption or lack of adoption, and any assessments to follow should be included in the ongoing conversations.

As standards based approaches to reform continue to be utilized by states as a key feature of educational improvement efforts, interest in and the need for useful descriptions of practice, assessments, and standards will become increasingly important for answering questions about the implementation of standards in the classroom (Porter et al., 2001). Within the state of Nebraska, districts are currently ranked academically at the high school level within a comparison group of their athletic conference. This ranking system is used as a measure to identify the “winners” and the “losers” academically. It implies that the teachers in the losing district are not as effective as those teachers in the winning district. Further assumptions regarding curriculum adoption, assessment practices, instructional strategies, and leadership has also been applied.

As leaders within MOEC, it is important that a clear understanding of the data, the ability to articulate the data to the public, and continued conversations about the data take place in order to benefit all students. The implementation of a district or school policy is viewed from the learning design perspective, as a process in which practitioners at multiple levels of an educational system reorganize and elaborate their practices (or not) in settings shaped by others’ policymaking efforts (Cobb & Jackson 2011b). The policy

makers in education include MOEC group, and policy makers influence systems of standards and assessments.

Nebraska leaders can learn from the education leaders in Iowa as the CCSS has been adopted and implemented throughout the state of Iowa. The process of implementing the CCSS should be the focus of improvement – oriented investigations that can inform the development of effective implementation models. It is one thing to formulate sound instructional policies and another to support their successful implementation (Cobb et al., 2011b). Gradual implementation of assessment and accountability measures has been successful in Washington State. This poses a problem for states not yet adopting CCSS – there will be no time for gradual implementation to the new standards and assessments (Stecher et al., 2001). As a state, Nebraska historically has delayed adoption of major education initiatives. Currently Nebraska is one of only five states yet to adopt the CCSS (Alaska, Minnesota, Texas and Virginia). The reasons given are political – stating a desire for continued state control and local district control of educational policy. “Our standards are rigorous, more rigorous than the CCSS,” has been the statement made by members of the Nebraska Department of Education, most recently Dr. Pat Roscheskwi (personal communication, June 19, 2012).

As recently demonstrated by the change in NeSA writing scoring at both 8th and 11th grades, an observed drop in scores was reportedly due to new assessment criteria, higher expectations, and a new assessment tool. This drop created a flurry of local districts’ conversation regarding the results and the meaning. The following are questions regarding why the scores are lower: Does it mean poorer instruction? Or, does it mean less effective teachers? Or, does it mean less able students? Those same

questions can be assumed when in 2014-2015 it is predicted that there will be a federal level assessment measuring the CCSS. With a change in assessment, research states that scores decrease as well (Stecher et al., 2001). Nebraska will be at a disadvantage when the federal assessment is mandated. Iowa, specifically Council Bluffs Public Schools (member of MOEC), will be at an advantage over the Omaha Metro Area. Without an alignment to the standards, there will not be an alignment to the assessment, and without an alignment to the assessment, instructional practices will not be aligned.

Further investigation into Nebraska's delay in adoption of the CCSS should be conducted asking the following question: how do we ensure our students are prepared to complete, locally, state wide, and nationally if we do not have an instructional, curriculum, and assessment system aligned? Iowa leaders can lend support in the adoption process and guide Nebraska in the upcoming next steps. Learning means using information wisely – not simply emulating what others have found to work or not work for them (Valverde & Schmidt 2000). Can 45 states, including Iowa, be wrong in their adoption of the Common Core State Standards? Only time will tell.

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