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**CIVIL RIGHTS**  
RESEARCH ROUNDTABLE  
**ON EDUCATION**  
INFORMING CHANGE

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The Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity & Diversity is a multidisciplinary, collaborative venture to produce research, research-based policy prescriptions, and curricular innovation on issues of racial and ethnic justice in California and the nation.

## HIGHER STANDARDS FOR ALL: IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMON CORE FOR EQUITY IN EDUCATION

by Lisa Quay

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Civil Rights Research Roundtable on Education is an initiative of the Warren Institute that convenes an ongoing learning community composed of leading national civil rights organizations to discuss the latest educational research and evidence-based practices related to civil rights goals in education.

This research brief reviews the research and evidence that informs the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Common Core), an effort led by governors and state school leaders to promote universal adoption of “fewer, clearer, higher” content standards that are internationally benchmarked and aligned with the skills and knowledge necessary for college and career success. In addition, the brief examines the available research to better understand how the adoption of the Common Core might affect students of color and English Language Learners (ELL) in particular—those students who have historically been held to lower academic expectations; enrolled in the least challenging, often non-academic courses; and continue to experience far worse academic outcomes in comparison to their white and non-ELL peers.

increasing concern among the public, business community, and policymakers that American students are ill-equipped to meet post-secondary and career demands and are falling behind their international peers. It promises to lay the foundation for system-wide education reform by aligning states behind a select set of essential content standards that reflect the academic knowledge and skills that research suggests are the most crucial for college and career success. According to the initiative guidelines, participating states must adopt the entirety of these “fewer, clearer, higher” standards and as such, the standards must comprise at least 85 percent of their adopted standards, effectively bringing an end to the “50-states, 50-standards” status quo. More recently, the Obama Administration issued its *Blueprint for Reform*, which signaled a desire for Congress to include incentives for states to adopt some version of the state-developed Common Core standards into a reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.<sup>1</sup>

The Common Core represents the latest development in over two decades of standards-based reform. Indeed, the effort to be more explicit and transparent about the knowledge and skills students are expected to master by high school graduation is only a first but necessary

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The Common Core State Standards (Common Core) Initiative responds to

1. See *A Blueprint for Reform*, available at: [http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publication\\_pg4.html#part4](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publication_pg4.html#part4) [Accessed March 31, 2010].

## KEY CONCEPTS

### The Common Core State Standards Initiative

Initiated in spring of 2009, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is jointly coordinated by the National Governors Association's (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The advisory group for the Initiative is comprised of Achieve, Inc., ACT, the College Board, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). The Common Core State Standards Initiative released a draft of the overarching math and language arts content standards (termed the "college and career ready standards" by the Initiative) for public comment in September 2009 and the individual K-12 grade-level content standards in these subjects were released for public comment in early March 2010. Both sets of content standards are expected to be finalized in early 2010. Once finalized, states will be able to adopt them on their own timeline.

### Content standards

In general, content standards are broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area. The Common Core State Standards Initiative has committed to produce content standards for math and language arts (reading, writing, and speaking and listening) that both define what students should know and be able to do by the end of high school and on a grade-by-grade basis. Unless otherwise note, references to "standards" in this brief pertain to content standards as defined here.

### Performance standards

In contrast to broad content standards, performance standards describe what a "proficient" level of mastery looks like for each of the content standards. Most often, performance standards are expressed as cut scores on a test. A cut score is the score on a test that signifies proficiency (e.g., students must get 85 percent of the items on a test correct to be deemed proficient. In this example, 85 percent is the cut score.). (At this time, the Common Core Initiative does not involve work to specify performance standards.)

cornerstone of the drive to improve the performance of the nation's schools. Once the core standards are identified, valid assessments must be developed to measure progress against them; curricula and instructional supports (e.g., scope and sequence guides) must be crafted to effectively convey the standards across all grades; and teacher preparation and professional development programs must be developed to enable teachers to deliver this curricula to students with varying prior preparation and native languages. This effort assumes that once all of the key elements of the educational system map back to the adopted standards, schools will be better positioned to deliver standards-based instruction to all students, and students will be more likely to acquire the desired knowledge and skills.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT STANDARDS

The current practice of requiring states to develop their own content standards (as a condition of federal funding) has been widely criticized for giving rise to standards that are (1) so numerous in some states that they prevent comprehensive coverage by teachers and send confusing signals to students and parents; (2) wildly inconsistent across state lines; and (3) insufficiently rigorous such that many students who master the state standards remain unprepared for post-secondary success. The Common Core Initiative attempts to respond to these criticisms by identifying a set of content standards that are fewer in number; more clear in their meaning; more coherent across grades, more consistent across states; higher in terms of cognitive demand and expected depth of student understanding; aligned to the knowledge and skills research suggests are required for success in college and career; and benchmarked against the best of international standards for student learning.

In this section, we review the research and evidence underlying each of the major criticisms of current state content standards and explain how the Common Core attempts to address these widespread complaints.

### State standards are too numerous

A common criticism of the current state standards system is that it has led to the creation of lengthy and repetitive "laundry lists" of knowledge and skills that often hamper effective instruction.<sup>3</sup> As an example, in their study of domestic and international math standards, Schmidt and colleagues found

2. J.F. CARR AND D.E. HARRIS, *Succeeding with standards: linking curriculum, assessment, and action planning*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, (2001).

3. See examples, ACHIEVE, INC., *Benchmarking for Success*, (2009). P. BARTON, *National Standards: Getting beneath the Surface*, Educational Testing Service, (2005).

that rather than emphasizing a progression of increasingly complex core concepts, as is done by the highest performing countries worldwide, American standards literally cover the same topics over and over again, from first through eighth grade. Among 21 sets of state standards reviewed, individual topics were repeated in each of six years on average, twice as long as in the highest performing countries. The authors conclude that the “organizing principle” of state standards “seems [to be] to include every topic at almost every grade.”<sup>4</sup>

The result is a list that is far too long for teachers to teach in a single year, and thus, teachers are left to guess at what to teach, hitting the mark in some cases, and missing it in others.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, teachers’ own estimates of the time needed to cover all of the state standards in their subject and grade level far exceed the actual instructional time available to them.<sup>6</sup>

### State standards are confusing and inconsistent across states

Content standards are currently determined at the state level. While many states adopted standards on their own, the federal government mandated in 1994 that every state develop and implement standards and assessments as a condition of federal assistance.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the adopted standards varied substantially across states.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the standards differ on a number of dimensions: in terms of what material is covered; how specifically this material is described; at what grade this material is covered; and for how many grades the material is repeated. In her 2006 study, Reys found that state “grade level expectations” varied substantially in terms of granularity, the level of expected cognitive demand, and the placement and

sequencing of topics by grade.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Porter and colleagues used a sophisticated content mapping procedure to determine the overlap between several states’ standards and found that the adopted standards vary “considerably,” particularly in individual grades, but also for the “aggregated” standards that approximate what a state expects its students to master by the end of eighth grade. Porter concluded that there was little evidence of a *de facto* national curriculum contained in the separate state standards.<sup>10</sup>

In a study of teachers across five states, teachers reported being frustrated by the challenge of addressing numerous state standards and determining which were the most essential to cover.<sup>11</sup> Teachers also report that standards are sometimes too vague to be useful in guiding instruction.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, high performing countries such as Singapore, Japan, Korea, and the Czech Republic provide their teachers with “much clearer” guidance on the major concepts to be addressed and mastered in each grade.<sup>13</sup>

The inconsistency of standards across states has a number of consequences for teaching and learning. At the most basic level, it sends confusing messages to students, parents, and teachers about what students ought to know and be able to do by the time they finish high school. Researcher Peggy Carr, for example, describes the experience of students in three contiguous states: Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. These three states have set very different standards for their students, and as a consequence, a student who moves from North Carolina to South Carolina might go from being viewed as a proficient reader according to North Carolina’s standards and assessments to being placed in a remedial class in South Carolina.<sup>14</sup>

4. W.H. SCHMIDT, H.C. WANG, AND C.C. MCKNIGHT, “Curriculum coherence: an examination of US mathematics and science content standards from an international perspective,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37 (5), (2005). Also, A. GINSBURG, S. LEINWAND, T. ANSTROM, AND E. POLLOCK, *What the United States can learn from Singapore’s world-class mathematics system (and what Singapore can learn from the United States)*, American Institutes for Research, (2005).

5. P. BARTON (2005).

6. J. FLORIAN, *Teacher Survey of Standards-Based Instruction: Addressing Time*, Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), (1999).

7. This federal mandate was included in the 1994 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965* (ESEA).

8. D. HARRIS AND M. GOERTZ, *The Potential Effects of “High-Quality and Uniform” Standards: Lessons from a Synthesis of Previous Research and Proposals for a New Research Agenda*, report to the National Research Council (NRC), (2008).

9. B. REYS, *The intended mathematics curriculum as represented in state-level curriculum standards: consensus or confusion*, Information Age Publishing, (2006). See also, B. REYS, cited in A. BEATTY, *Common Standards for K-12 Education? Considering the Evidence: Summary of a Workshop Series*, NRC, (2008).

10. A. PORTER, M. POLIKOFF, AND J. SMITHSON, “Is there a *de facto* National Intended Curriculum? Evidence from State Content Standards,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31 (3), (2009).

11. D. MASSELL, *The Current Status and Role of Standards Based Reform in the States*, report to the NRC, (2008).

12. M. GOERTZ, *Standards-based Reform: Lessons from the Past, Directions for the Future*, report to the NRC, (2008).

13. S. FUHRMAN, L. RESNICK, AND L. SHEPARD, “Commentary: Standards aren’t enough,” *Education Week*, (October 14, 2009), 28.

14. P. CARR, cited in A. BEATTY (2008).

## Another common criticism of current state standards is that they too often hold students to low expectations.

### State standards often hold students to low expectations for mastery and rigor

Another common criticism of current state standards is that they too often hold students to low expectations. Much of the available research on the relative rigor of state standards comes from comparisons with international standards, as well as comparisons of state performance standards (i.e., cut scores on state assessments) to levels of proficiency determined on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>15</sup> While the latter is not the same as directly evaluating the rigor of the content standards themselves, such analyses can help shed light on the relative rigor of state standards because states are asked to use the NAEP as a benchmark when constructing their own standards, and because the state performance assessments are intended to align with the material covered in the corresponding state content standards.<sup>16</sup> These analyses have consistently found state expectations for student proficiency to lie far below those of the NAEP.<sup>17</sup>

In international comparisons, researchers find that American states' standards consistently come up short. Unlike state standards, in which numerous topics are touched upon briefly and repeatedly over several grades, the best performing countries teach fewer topics in coherent progressions that provide an ever increasing level of conceptual depth, facilitating deeper mastery of the concepts by

students.<sup>18</sup> Researchers who study learning behavior and cognitive development have demonstrated the importance of such an approach.<sup>19</sup> William Schmidt reports, for example, that the topics that tend to get the least coverage in state standards tend to be the most important—those deeper topics that build students' conceptual understanding.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, while students in top performing nations are studying algebra and geometry by the eighth grade, most American eighth grade courses are still focused on arithmetic. The same is true in science. Indeed, Schmidt found that the curriculum studied by the average American eighth grader is two years behind the curriculum received by eighth graders in the highest performing countries worldwide.<sup>21</sup>

### State standards are not adequately aligned with the demands of college and career

Many analysts argue that today's standards are not adequately aligned to the knowledge and skills necessary for success in higher education (without need for remedial classes) or a career in an increasingly international marketplace.<sup>22</sup> Characteristic of the historic divide between the K-12 and higher education systems, most states' K-12 content standards were crafted without substantial input from post-secondary institutions.<sup>23</sup> This disconnect is exacerbated by the fact that few post-secondary institutions (including two-year colleges) are clear about what they expect of students once they are admitted.<sup>24</sup> Many states, moreover, have not established uniform or coherent admission requirements across all of their state colleges and universities.

Consequently, while 71 percent of high school teachers in a national survey conducted by ACT reported that their state standards prepare students "well" or "very well" for college; only 28 percent of post-secondary instructors said the same. The data on actual achievement are likewise

15. The NAEP is administered every other year to a large national sample of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade. Cut scores on the 0-300 or 0-500 point scales correspond to four proficiency levels: "Below Basic," "Basic," "Proficient," and "Advanced."

16. P. CARR, cited in A. BEATTY (2008). The extent to which state assessments actually align with state standards in practice is the subject of a substantial body of research.

17. See example, National Center for Education Statistics, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007*, (2010).

18. W.H. SCHMIDT, R. HOUANG, S. SHARRANI, *International Lessons about National Standards*, Fordham Institute, (2009). B. REYS (2006). W.H. SCHMIDT et al (2005).

19. S. FUHRMAN, L. RESNICK, AND L. SHEPARD (2009).

20. W.H. SCHMIDT, cited in A. BEATTY (2008).

21. ACHIEVE, INC. (2009).

22. See example, ACHIEVE, INC. *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*, (2004).

23. The Institute for Educational Leadership and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Gathering Momentum: Building the Learning Connection between Schools and Colleges*, (2002).

24. THE EDUCATION TRUST, "A New Core Curriculum for All: Aiming High for Other People's Children," *Thinking K-16*, (2003).

troubling: fewer than one in four 2009 high school graduates who completed a core academic curriculum and took the ACT were deemed ready for college-level work in English, writing, reading, math, and science.<sup>25</sup>

Business community surveys indicate that employers typically believe that high schools do not provide students with the skills they look for in prospective employees. In particular, employers prioritize experience, recommendations, and “soft skills” (e.g., effective verbal communication; cooperation with others; resolving conflicts; being responsible; having a good attitude)—skills that researchers suggest are rarely taught in high schools or colleges.<sup>26</sup>

### State standards do not pass muster in the face of international comparisons

There is a large disconnect between American states’ standards and those adopted by the countries that rank among the highest on international assessments of student learning (e.g., Finland, Korea, Japan, Canada, Singapore). These gaps span a number of dimensions: the sheer number of standards; the structure and progression of standards within and across grades; and the relative rigor of the standards and the level of mastery expected of students. In sum, the standards of the highest performing countries share the following characteristics: they cover a smaller number of topics in greater depth at every grade level; the topics are structured more coherently in conceptual progressions that facilitate deeper learning with each subsequent grade; and they are more rigorous in terms of the level of advanced material and mastery required, both overall and at each grade level.<sup>27</sup>

### The Common Core Initiative aims to address criticisms of current state standards

The Common Core State Standards Initiative seeks to address each of these concerns in its new proposed content standards. The Initiative emphasizes the importance of shared standards by requiring participating states to use the finalized Common Core standards as the vast majority

(at least 85 percent) of their adopted content standards. If successful, the Common Core will largely solve the issue of a lack of consistency across states—a situation that is, in the best case, merely confusing, and in the worst case, harmful to students. The Common Core hopes to both shorten the lengthy “laundry list” that characterizes many states’ current standards and ensure that the included standards truly represent what is necessary to prepare students for success in college or a career after high school.<sup>28</sup> To accomplish this end, inclusion criteria limit selection to the knowledge and skills “essential” for success in “entry-level, credit-bearing, academic college courses” and to “workforce training programs for careers that offer competitive, livable wages, opportunities for career advancement, and are in a growing or sustainable industry.” The Initiative also requires that the standards identified for inclusion be understandable by the general public, as well as concretely “teachable, learnable, and measurable.”

The Initiative also promises to increase the overall coherence and rigor of what is expected of American students by emphasizing a cohesive vision of the “big ideas” of a discipline and meaningful learning progressions, and requiring students to show “deep conceptual understanding” by applying “content knowledge and skills to new situations.” These principles would align American standards more closely with those of the highest performing nations worldwide. The Initiative relied on available research, the experience of educators and content experts, state best practices, and international benchmarks to determine which knowledge and skills meet these criteria. Specifically, the panel turned to the following types of sources: data on assessments and course taking (e.g., NAEP, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study); research conducted by Achieve, Inc. and ACT; publications of professional organizations (e.g., the National Council of the Teachers of Mathematics); AP course descriptions and other publications of the College Board; research by academics; and standards documents from leading states (e.g., California, Massachusetts, and Texas) and countries (e.g., Canada, Finland, and Singapore).<sup>29</sup>

25. ACT, *ACT National Curriculum Survey 2009*, (2009).

26. P. BARTON, *High School Reform and Work*, Educational Testing Service, (2006). R.I. LERMAN, *Widening the Scope of Standards through Work-Based Learning*, Urban Institute, paper presented at the 2008 APPAM conference, (November 2008).

27. W.H. SCHMIDT et al (2005). ACHIEVE, INC. (2009).

28. It is important to note that a fundamental assumption underlying the Common Core is that the skills necessary for success in college and career are largely similar; however, the research to date has not conclusively determined whether this assumption is valid. *See example*, P. BARTON (2006), R.I. LERMAN (2008).

29. The Common Core State Standards Initiative criteria and sources are provided on the Initiative’s website: [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

## WHAT WE ARE STILL LEARNING: IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AHEAD

Adopting shared standards that are benchmarked against the best of international standards and American post-secondary education expectations is a necessary first step toward realizing the goal of increased excellence and equity across all of America's public schools. Once better content standards are in place, states, districts, and schools will need to focus on a number of critical implementation issues that will determine whether all students are given a real opportunity to meet the more rigorous standards and learn the skills and knowledge necessary for success in college and career. In this section, we discuss what current and on-going research is beginning to tell us about these implementation issues that will determine the ultimate success or failure of the Common Core in transforming American education.

One recent study offers a look into the challenges of implementing a rigorous college prep curriculum across an entire urban district characterized by high rates of poverty. The Chicago Public Schools implemented reforms in the late 1990s that held its students to universally higher standards by enrolling all of them in college preparatory courses. In 1997, the district-wide reform required all students, regardless of prior achievement or special education status to enroll in college-preparatory English and math classes in 9th grade (struggling students received supplemental supports in the form of a second class period in the subjects). In a report detailing results of the reforms in their early stages, Allensworth and colleagues found that while the policy did indeed reduce disparities in advanced course enrollment in 9th grade by race / ethnicity and special education status, course failure rates increased, grades declined slightly, test scores failed to improve, and students were no more likely to enroll in college after graduating from high school.

Despite these disappointing findings, however, the policy did increase rates of credit accumulation in the advanced 9th grade math and English courses and did not

appear to have increased the dropout rate, as many feared would be the case. The authors conclude that the disappointing results in Chicago might have been avoided had the district better anticipated key implementation and organizational challenges related to the "college prep for all" policy.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, they are currently conducting additional studies of the district's mid-course corrections.<sup>31</sup> The researchers are also exploring the ways in which Chicago schools staffed the additional college prep courses; whether school organizational structure and capacity had a mediating effect on the policy's impact on student outcomes; whether schools with greater student supports led to better outcomes for low-ability students; and the extent to which a strong professional community or instructional leadership on the part of site principals might have improved such outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Overall, the authors' present findings emphasize the need for more attention to how students are taught, and to the "quality and depth" of the assigned tasks, as well as to the content of what they are taught. In addition, the Chicago study suggests a greater need to focus on bolstering students' academic engagement (e.g., study skills, classroom participation, homework completion, and regular classroom attendance)—behaviors that prior Chicago research has illustrated are eight times more predictive of subsequent student failure than test scores, but that many teachers struggle to teach.<sup>33</sup>

These avenues of inquiry are supported by other recent research on de-tracking, which has found that while de-tracking alone does not have positive effects on student outcomes, a combination of de-tracking and the simultaneous implementation of coordinated and standards-aligned supports (e.g., supplemental workshops or tutoring for struggling students, common preparation time for teachers, and project-oriented student work, among a host of other observed practices) can lead to positive outcomes in de-tracked, mixed ability classrooms.<sup>34</sup> In his recent review of the de-tracking literature, Gamoran also highlights three implementation challenges that must be addressed by such

30. E. ALLENSWORTH, T. NOMI, N. MONTGOMERY AND V.E. LEE, "College Preparatory Curriculum for All: Academic Consequences of Requiring Algebra and English I for Ninth Graders in Chicago," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31 (4), (2009).

31. E. ALLENSWORTH, *College Preparatory Curriculum for All: Lessons from Chicago*, presentation to the Civil Rights Research Roundtable on Education, Washington, D.C., (March 4, 2010).

32. E. ALLENSWORTH et al. (2009).

33. Ibid. E. ALLENSWORTH. (2010).

34. A. GAMORAN, *Tracking and Inequality: New Directions for Research and Practice*, Wisconsin Center for Education Research working paper, (2009).

schools: changing the beliefs of educators, many of whom currently do not believe in the ability of all students to learn challenging material; overcoming political interests that support the status quo (e.g., parents of high achieving students); and resolving technical challenges around the difficulty of instructing and supporting students of “widely varying” levels of past performance—a task for which, the author notes, few teachers are prepared today.<sup>35</sup>

## ISSUES OF CONCERN TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS COMMUNITY

The research described above highlights several issues of concern to the civil rights community. In particular, with the exception of the Chicago study, there is a paucity of research on issues specific to the unique challenges of the implementation of higher standards in high poverty schools and districts. This is highly relevant today as students of color, many of whom come from low-income families, are becoming isolated in increasingly re-segregated, failing schools.<sup>36</sup>

A similar lack of research is found in regard to rural schools, which often share certain characteristics with many of their urban counterparts (e.g., high rates of poverty, high rates of English Language Learners (ELL)), but also differ in important ways.<sup>37</sup> Given these schools and districts’ disproportionate lack of critical educational resources (e.g., experienced, effective teachers), implementation of a more rigorous Common Core may be more challenging in such educational settings.<sup>38</sup> As illustrated in the Chicago study, if teachers are ill-equipped to instruct a wider array of students in curricula they have never taught before, it will be nearly impossible for the students themselves to meet the new standards.

In addition to such considerations for high poverty urban and rural schools and districts, the research suggests additional issues surrounding the adoption and implementation of the Common Core with regard to special

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populations, such as ELL students. A criticism of the newly proposed Common Core is that the standards are geared towards native- or near-native English speakers, and so they may need to be modified so that they can effectively guide instruction for ELL students, particularly those who begin learning English in the middle and high school grades. Furthermore, given the importance of aligned assessments in standards-based reform, long-standing concerns around the validity of assessments used to evaluate the content knowledge of ELL students become even more pressing.<sup>39</sup>

Our review indicates that a number of pressing near-term implementation issues must be addressed as the standards are finalized and begin to be adopted. Specifically, it will be important to encourage and enable the federal government to use its various policy levers (e.g., the Race to the Top and other competitive grant programs; the reauthorization of ESEA<sup>40</sup>) to ensure that certain elements central to the successful implementation of the Common Core at the classroom and school level are adopted alongside the standards themselves. Three reform components merit special consideration.

35. Ibid.

36. NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE & EDUCATION FUND AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS PROJECT, *Still Looking to the Future: Voluntary K-12 School Integration*, (2008).

37. D. MONK, “Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Rural Areas,” *Future of Children*, 17 (1), (2007).

38. Ibid.

39. M.K. WOLF, J. KAO, J. HERMAN, L. BACHMAN, A. BAILEY, P. BACHMAN, T. FARNSWORTH, AND S. CHANG, *Issues in Assessing English Language Learners: English Language Proficiency Measures and Accommodation Uses*, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), (2008).

40. Such an effort might focus on the following key elements included in ESEA: Title I, which provides financial assistance to districts and schools with high percentages of poor children; Title I includes the School Improvement Grants program. Title II, which provides grants to encourage effective recruitment, hiring, retention, and professional development of teachers and administrators. Title III, which provides funding to ensure that all English language learners attain English proficiency and meet state performance standards in core subjects. Title VI, which helps states develop and improve student assessments. Title VII, which supports educational efforts supporting American Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native students.

## Aligned Assessments

Research has confirmed the widely acknowledged anecdotal evidence that school leaders and teachers emphasize “teaching to the test” under assessment-based accountability systems, thus underscoring the need to develop and adopt assessments truly aligned with the new, more rigorous standards.<sup>41</sup> As mentioned earlier, one pressing issue is the need for the development and validation of aligned assessments for ELL students.

## Standards-aligned Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Materials

Curricula, particularly as embodied in textbooks, have a substantial effect on what is taught in classrooms.<sup>42</sup> While states and districts have ultimate decision-making authority over curricula, the federal government can encourage the development of common curricular guideposts as a complement to the Common Core. These guideposts would provide more detailed explanations of the content covered and the most effective, coherent progression of core concepts contained in the content standards, including recommendations for students whose achievement lags behind grade-level. Such resources could be helpful tools to states as they craft new curricular materials aligned with the Common Core.

## Effective Teaching and Instructional Capacity

The early experience in Chicago clearly indicates that the effort to strengthen content and performance standards will fall flat unless administrators can find ways to increase teachers’ capacity to successfully instruct students to meet new standards.<sup>43</sup> Teacher training and professional development programs must be dramatically improved to reflect this reality. Most urgent needs suggested by available research include professional learning aimed at school and classroom practices that improve students’ academic engagement and study behaviors; differentiated instruction for classes of students with varying levels of academic preparedness; English and content-based instruction for ELL students;

and deepened understanding of the more advanced concepts contained in the Common Core, particularly for teachers who have previously taught only remedial courses.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, the Common Core initiative represents a necessary first step in a renewed drive to improve the performance of the nation’s public schools. Its greatest promise lies in the opportunity it presents for achieving the long-sought alignment of strong standards to the high-quality assessments, curricula, and instruction that research suggests are critical to improving student performance. But precisely because these elements are tightly linked at the implementation stages, it will be imperative for civil rights groups to be involved at all stages of the policy development process. The urgency of involvement is heightened by clear evidence that the risks and stakes are greatest for low-income and minority youth—those students who are disproportionately trapped in the nation’s lowest performing schools.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

In addition to the citations included in this brief, the author recommends the following resources for those seeking additional information on the Common Core:

The Common Core State Standards Initiative website:  
[www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

The websites of the members of the advisory board to the Common Core Initiative:

- Achieve, Inc.: [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)
- ACT: [www.act.org](http://www.act.org)
- The College Board: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)
- National Association of State Boards of Education: [www.nasbe.org](http://www.nasbe.org)
- State Higher Education Executive Officers: [www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org)

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41. See example, CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY, *How State and Federal Accountability Policies Have Influenced Curriculum and Instruction in Three States: common findings from Rhode Island, Illinois, and Washington*, (2009). L. RESNICK, R. ROTHMAN, J.B. SLATTERY, J.L. VRANEK, “Benchmarking and Alignment of Standards and Testing,” *Educational Assessment*, 9 (1), (2004).

42. W.H. SCHMIDT, H.C. WANG, AND C.C. MCKNIGHT. (2005).

43. E. ALLENSWORTH et al. (2009).

44. E. ALLENSWORTH et al. (2009). D. AUGUST, *English-language Learners and the Common Core Standards*, presentation to the Civil Rights Research Roundtable on Education, Washington, D.C., (March 4, 2010).