

“How Did We Get Here?”

From *A Nation at Risk* to the *Race to the Top*”

K. Scheidler, May, 2014

**“*The White House has agreed to work with the governors to develop a set of national performance goals, for the first time in history, to guarantee that Americans will have an education system second to none.*”**

**–Governor Bill Clinton, 1989**

Common Core State Standards didn’t spring suddenly from the Obama administration, but are a next step in a 30-year search for school improvement nationally.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) reported on the “rising tide of mediocrity,” spurred on in part by Japan’s ascendance in economic power, and concern that other countries were outperforming the United States in education achievement. This *Nation at Risk* report propelled broad-based discussion of how to improve schools nationally.

As one response for action from fear of our schools failing, a 1988 amendment to the federal Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act limited state level tests to trial assessments in mathematics and reading for those states choosing to participate on a voluntary basis. 1988 legislation introduced an important change by calling for “identifying appropriate achievement goals for each age and grade in each subject are to be tested.”

A series of Governors’ conferences in the late 1980’s brought forward focused discussion on the need for schools to improve, and resulted in consensus at the Charlottesville, Virginia, 1989 Governors’ Summit on Education for the goal for

students to be tested at grades 4, 8 and 12 to assess proficiency. This goal was presented in President Bush's State of the Union speech in January, 1990.

State curriculum frameworks were published in the early 1990's, with state tests implemented, with the goal of better preparing students and to assess their learning.

The *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2002, with strong congressional bipartisan support, aimed to move all students to proficient learning on state Standards by 2014, with the primary impetus on sanctions if schools fell behind in even one student "subgroup." The disparity of state standards of the 1990's, resulting in disparity of achievement levels to reach "proficient," logically led to national common standards, initiated in 2009.

With lack of congressional approval seen for renewal of the *No Child Left Behind* Act, an impatient Obama administration constructed a new national program, *Race to the Top*. States were asked to apply to compete for federal approval to bring this program to their own states, and required state-wide acceptance of program goals and practices.

*Race to the Top* called for common higher level educator evaluation. Fifteen states are promoting these more stringent goals. Common Core State Standards national standards, coming from state departments of education, for common national standards were published in 2011. These new higher level Standards include new measure of accountability based on student growth rather than attaining "Proficient" level. Accountability changed to newly favoring struggling students over high demographic districts, in simply looking for annual growth, not requiring the goal of Proficient.

The Common Core State Standards, like most state standards in the 1990's, were based on the learning goals of national content organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Initiated by state Governors' meetings in the late 1980's, culminating with a 1989 report calling for new state tests, moving to strong congressional legislative approval with the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2002, and publishing of new Common Core State Standards in 2011 developed with Chief State School officers, our country has had over a dozen years of standards and testing programs nationally. It's been over 30 years time from the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report *A Nation at Risk* propelling the move for broad discussion, action, and federal and state regulations for national school improvement. States, school systems, and schools work to implement new high expectations.

Many of our teachers now have taken the state Standards tests as students themselves; this isn't new to them. Along with incremental moves toward higher student achievement at the national policy level, new research and practice to support more struggling students have come from the education field. These strategies include extended time, differentiated learning, mentor teachers, collaborative student work to learn from peers, project based learning, and incorporating technology for learning. Schools and teachers experiment and learn.

This process of "education reform" with top-down regulations and new methods of teaching has brought incremental change to schools, primarily in a laudable way of attempts to upgrade standards for all students. However, of note, the *Race to the Top* inclusion of a 33-item teacher evaluation model in four main categories, with teacher's test scores as one factor in teacher evaluation is a huge change, and a big new step, but makes sense since teachers make the difference in whether students learn or not. There's no question that teachers are anxious, and need support. Under *Race to the Top* tenure - job security - itself is threatened. Can schools and teachers continue to withstand the pressure to continue to move to higher performance? We hope these writing pieces provide some help.

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Sources: Vinovskis, M (1999). *The Road to Charlottesville: The 1989 Summit*, Paper presented, A Publication of the National Education Goals Panel.

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