

How Did We Get Here?
From *A Nation at Risk* to National Common Standards and *Race to the Top*

K. Scheidler, October, 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 brains of the Obama administration, but are a next step in an over thirty-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 initiated state level tests for trial assessments in mathematics and reading for those states choosing to participate on a voluntary basis. This 1988 legislation introduced an important change, stating, “Identifying appropriate achievement goals for each age and grade in each subject are to be tested,” initiating a national cultural shift in schools to create state learning goals and test learning results.

A series of Governors' conferences in the late 1980's initiated focused discussion on the need for schools to improve. These state Governors' conferences resulted in consensus at the Charlottesville, Virginia, 1989 Governors' Summit on Education on the goal for students to be tested at grades 4, 8 and 12, to assess proficiency. This plan was presented in President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech in January, 1990.

State curriculum frameworks were published in the early 1990's, and state tests implemented soon after, with the goal of better preparing students and assessing their learning, as assurance for compliance with learning standards.

The *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2002, with strong national Congressional bipartisan support, aimed to move all students to proficient learning on state Standards by 2014, with sanctions if schools fell behind in even one student "subgroup," largely constituting traditionally underperforming racial, learning challenged, and poverty level student groups. The wide disparity of state standards of the 1990's, resulting in very different state to state 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 and accompanying funding to bring this program to their own states, and required state-wide acceptance of program goals and practices. Common Core State Standards came from national groups, not federal legislation or policy, and were voluntarily adopted by over 40 states.

Race to the Top called for not only supporting the higher national common standards and now national tests, but also, significantly, common higher level educator evaluation. A piece of this evaluation includes a teacher's multi-year test scores, aimed to have teachers raise learning levels for all students. States competed to be included in this *Race to the Top* more stringent, challenging program to raise the quality of education for traditionally underperforming student groups, and the accompanying funding. Fifteen states were approved are promoting these more stringent goals. *Race to the Top* modified the *No Child Left Behind Act* goal, to have the more realistic goal of narrowing the Achievement Gap by 50% by 2016- 2017, not the goal of closing this gap of the *No Child Left Behind* program, to move all students to Proficient.

Common Core State Standards, developed by national content area experts, were published in 2010 -2011. Like many state standards of the 1990's, Common Core Standards are based on the learning goals of national content organizations such as

those of the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

These new Standards include new measure of accountability based on student growth rather than the earlier goal of attaining “Proficient” level. Accountability changed to newly favoring struggling students over high demographic districts in looking for annual growth.

Therefore, initiated by state Governors’ meetings in the late 1980’s, culminating with the 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 developed with Chief State School officers, our country has had over a dozen years of standards and testing programs nationally. States, school systems, and schools work to implement new high expectations with all students, constituting a fight to change the pattern of demographics determining destiny as well as raising the bar in the quality of learning by more challenging Common Core State Standards and more challenging tests.

Many 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 and are brought alive in classrooms. These strategies include extended time on learning, one-on-one tutoring, differentiated learning, collaborative student work to learn from peers, project based learning, and incorporating technology for learning. Schools and teachers experiment and learn. The Educator Evaluation model of the *Race to the Top* program, which also includes administrator evaluation criteria, focuses on student learning but also includes as one of four areas of evaluation a professional culture area, in which teachers are asked to share information and seek help from others, promoting a collaborative school culture to promote student learning.

This process of education reform with top-down regulations and new methods of teaching has brought incremental change to schools, primarily in the laudable way of attempts to upgrade standards for all students. However, the *Race to the Top* 33-item teacher evaluation model in four main categories, with teacher’s test scores as one factor

in teacher evaluation is a huge change, but makes sense since research and experience show that teachers make the difference in whether students learn or not.

There's no question that teachers are anxious, and need support. Administrators chafe under new regulations. Under *Race to the Top* tenure – job security – itself is threatened. Understandably, intending to include all teachers in standards learning practice and test score measures of learning are met with apprehension.

Can districts, schools and teachers continue to withstand the pressure to move to higher performance, especially with traditionally underperforming students? As a nation we've survived the introduction of state learning standards and tests, and with sanctions on schools where demographics correlate with students learning on tests. We see pockets of success with students who normally have not learned well in school.

With rigorous Common Core State Standards, new tests, and stricter accountability, this is a national experiment to raise the learning standards in all participating states, raising the bar nationally. The aim is to narrow the long-standing Achievement Gap between middle class white children from relatively wealthy, well educated, and stable home lives and the traditionally underserved minority groups, while at the same time increasing the quality of learning. It's a leap of faith. It's also an ambitious challenge worth trying. We hope thoughts here provide some help.

Sources:

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