

A Ray of Sunlight in Education

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By Jack Jennings

The nation is awash in pessimism. Persistent unemployment, continuing wars, unexpected earthquakes, searing droughts, and drenching hurricanes have dampened the usual optimism of the American people.

This week, a ray of sunlight pierced the clouds of doom. According to local educators, America's public elementary and secondary schools are on the path to a more rigorous curriculum, and in their view this will lead to a better educated citizenry.

That is the main conclusion of a report released on September 14th by the [Center on Education Policy](#) (CEP). *Common Core State Standards: Progress and Challenges in School Districts' Implementation* is based on the responses of a nationally representative sample of school district officials surveyed earlier this year on the issue of academic standards. (www.cep-dc.org)

To date, forty four states and the District of Columbia have adopted a set of common standards for reading/English language arts and mathematics. Conservative states, liberal states, rural states, and urban states have endorsed this major change. Only a few states are hold-outs.

The breadth of support for this reform among the states is unique in American education. Twenty years ago, when states began creating academic standards for their schools, each state developed its own set of standards. Learning from that experience, the nation's governors and state school superintendents led an effort to write a set of common standards for English language arts and mathematics that all states could adopt voluntarily. Proponents of common standards emphasize that in our highly mobile society, students in Mississippi should not be learning different reading and math skills than students in Massachusetts. Public opinion surveys such as the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll show strong support for this idea.

CEP surveyed local school district officials about this important change in American education and reached the following main conclusions:

- Almost three-fifths of the districts in states adopting the common core standards viewed these standards as more rigorous than the ones they are replacing. Further, the same proportion of districts agreed that these standards will lead to improved student skills in math and English language arts.

- Two-thirds of the districts are developing or intend to develop a comprehensive plan and timeline for implementing the common standards in school year 2011-12. More than half of the districts are developing or purchasing curriculum materials.
- Limited funding is a major challenge in implementing all aspects of the common standards, since 82% of school districts expect to have less funding this school year than last. The good news is that districts are facing relatively little resistance in carrying out this reform from parents, community members, or educators.

The common standards are designed to help students to learn more so they will leave high school better prepared for college or employment. Therefore, the standards begin by identifying the basic knowledge and skills students are expected to learn in the early elementary grades, and then call on students to learn increasingly advanced material as they progress from grade to grade up through high school.

This work of identifying the building blocks in English language arts and math for students to learn in a logical and progressive manner will be of great use to teachers. American teachers have lacked a common infrastructure of knowledge that could guide what they teach to help improve their teaching skills. David K. Cohen made this observation in *Teaching and Its Predicaments*:

(Teachers) have had no common framework with which to make valid judgments about students' work and no common vocabulary with which to identify, investigate, discuss, and solve problems of teaching and learning. Hence they also have had little common knowledge that could be systematized for use in the education of intending teachers.

Thus, common state standards will not only help students learn more, but also hold promise for improving the teaching profession -- not a bad deal with one reform.

This is not to say that all will go smoothly. Adopting common standards is only the beginning. Teacher education programs need to be changed. New curriculum materials need to be developed. New tests must be designed and administered. All the elements of education must be improved and synchronized.

But at last, American schools will have a focal point. Students and teachers will know what is expected of them. Without this focal point, our schools have twisted and turned over the years, swinging from one reform to another. Now, there is hope for stability so that students can learn more and teachers can instruct better.

We needed that little bit of sunshine in these gloomy times.