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Key Education Issues in Review: Nevada Academic Content Standards

Introduction

In response to concerns about whether K-12 students are being adequately prepared for college and the workplace, many states, including Nevada, have adopted new academic standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. These standards are based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Implementation of the CCSS has been controversial for a number of reasons, including the manner in which the standards were adopted by states, a lack of professional development and high-quality instructional materials in support of the standards, and concerns with new and existing state-mandated testing and accountability systems.

Nevada's Facts and Statistics

- Only 28% of adults in Nevada possess an associate's degree or higher (Klaich & Erquiaga, 2014).
- Remediation rates at the state universities are high: 55.6% of high school graduates were placed in college remedial courses in 2013-14 (NSHE, 2014).
- The State Board of Education adopted new standards in 2010, known as the Nevada Academic Content (NVAC) Standards, based on the CCSS.

U.S. Facts and Statistics

- Although development of the CCSS was initiated by state organizations such as the National Governor's Association, the federal government created strong incentives for states to adopt the standards, by requiring states to use college- and career-ready standards in order to receive waivers from the federal No Child Left Behind law.
- Forty-five states initially adopted the standards between 2010-12.

- The CCSS is not a curriculum but a set of content and skills that can be promoted by different curricula (including textbooks).
- The CCSS in ELA emphasize reading of both literary and informational texts and teaching all students to write at a college-ready level. The construction and evaluation of oral and written arguments is a key set of skills needed for college and career readiness.
- The CCSS in mathematics contain a balance between calculating fluently and understanding traditional and alternative mathematical procedures. Compared to previous standards, somewhat less content is emphasized in favor of deeper understanding of the content represented.
- There is empirical research supporting many aspects of the standards, but not all aspects. Much of the research is based on relatively small- and medium-sized samples but not on how these educational innovations can be scaled-up effectively for large-scale implementation.

Nevada's Recent Actions to Date

- Districts in Nevada initially phased-in various portions of the new standards from 2011-2015, with full implementation scheduled for 2015-16.
- A survey of districts by the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) found the largest area of incomplete implementation was related to administrator preparation, followed by assessment in ELA.
- Both the NDE survey and other research indicate that a lack of high-quality professional development and high-quality instructional materials hamper effective implementation of the new standards.

Nevada's Recent Actions to Date (continued)

- The State Board of Education voted to use new state-mandated assessments aligned with the new standards, starting in 2015. The tests are being developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) for grades 3-5 and 8 and by ACT for grade 11. Four statewide, end-of-course exams in high school will also be developed in mathematics and ELA. The content and format of these tests could have a strong impact on district and school curricula.

Considerations for Future Directions

Educational reform is complex and requires careful evaluation and analysis. While some have called for the repeal of the new standards (Beck, Balfe, & Olson, 2014), this begs the question of what standards to put in their place. Furthermore, there is considerable misunderstanding among both educators and the public of what the new standards actually entail and also what problems should be attributed to the standards versus other aspects of the educational system. Finally, educators need stability to make educational reforms work. In making any mid-course corrections, key issues that policymakers could address include:

- Improving teacher and administrator understanding of the new standards (which appear to vary widely).
- Examining the appropriate balance of instruction between literary and informational texts in light of what will best prepare students for college.
- Improving the quantity and quality of professional development.
- Enhancing rather than diminishing the range of choices afforded to classroom teachers for how curriculum and instruction is provided.
- Evaluating the effects on the educational system of new "standards-aligned" tests and the state's existing accountability policies.

Statewide Benefits of Future Action

- Greater teacher effectiveness and satisfaction based on formative assessment and evaluation.
- Evaluation and modification of curriculum materials, potentially resulting in less frustration among teachers, students, and parents.
- Identification of successful local and statewide models related to teacher professional development (PD) that can guide strategic financial investments in PD by the state.
- Clarification of what the standards actually require and potentially more consistency in educators' understanding of the standards.

- Better consensus on the role of non-ELA teachers in students' acquisition of reading and writing skills across all subjects, especially in regards to informational texts.
- Reduction of any negative, unintended consequences caused by the state's assessment and accountability system, and strengthening those systems in a positive way.

Selected Resources

- Common Core State Standards Initiative website: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/development-process/>
Contains copies and summaries of the standards as well as other resources.
- Rothman, Robert. (2013). *Fewer, clearer, higher: How the Common Core State Standards can change classroom practice.* Harvard Education Press.
Gives a detailed history of the Common Core Standards.
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium website: <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/>
Describes the assessment system, contains sample items, and provides a list of resources for engaging parents and the public at <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/k-12-education/common-core-state-standards-tools-resources/>

UNLV Contact for Additional Information/Background

This summary represents a portion of work and research from a faculty member in the UNLV College of Education. For more information or to receive a copy of a comprehensive paper on this topic, please contact:

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