COMMENTARY

Common Core: "This Changes Almost Everything"

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The impending rollout of Common Core instructional standards will be an event of seismic proportions for California, reshaping virtually every corner of the state's educational system.

"This changes almost everything," said Michael Kirst, president of the California State Board of Education and professor emeritus at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, in opening his testimony on March 13 before the California State Senate Education Committee. He then listed examples of the new deeper learning standards that are to be adopted: "Students will be able to understand, describe, explain, justify, prove, derive, assess, illustrate, analyze, model, construct, compare, investigate, summarize and evaluate — those are some of them."

"These are very different qualities than you can measure in a closed-end multiple choice test," he added, referring to the predominant mode now being used to evaluate student achievement.

Kirst's testimony was based on a new policy paper, "The Common Core Meets State Policy: This Changes Almost Everything," published this month by Policy Analysis for California Education, a nonpartisan research center run jointly by researchers at Stanford, UC Berkeley, and the University of Southern California.

In sweeping breadth and great detail, Kirst, who as California school board president will play a key role in the state's adoption of the new approach, gave the committee an accounting of all that remains to be done to begin implementation of the Common Core in 2015 and have it fully in place in several years. (Video of Kirst's testimony is available here.) While some of the changes will be a natural extension of previous reform measures, he cautioned that other critical pieces would require the wholesale creation of new policies to insure all the myriad parts of the educational structure—from special education to vocational training—are in sync with Common Core standards.

"You've got all these moving parts, and they have to be aligned so that they're not conflicting with each other," Kirst said. He cited the need for improved coordination in the instructional handoff from preschool to kindergarten as an example of a system that would have to be built where little now exists. And on the other end of the spectrum, he emphasized an urgent need for high schools to work much more closely on coordinating standards not just with four-year colleges, but with all other post-secondary schools.

California is one of 45 states, as well as the District of Columbia, to have embraced the Common Core. In general, Kirst said, the new standards will dovetail more closely with the demands of post-secondary study; they will emphasize deeper understanding of increasingly complex material, with particular emphasis on math problem solving and analyzing nonfiction text, he noted.

Still, in some respects the new standards will be more tightly focused than the current benchmarks. "Our mathematics curriculum has been criticized as a mile wide and an inch deep," Kirst said, "so the idea is to use fewer standards."

But there is wide agreement that the current assessment system, with its standardized multiple-choice tests, is unsuited to measure the new learning skills being promoted in the Common Core. While new assessments are in the pipeline, Kirst testified that they are in different phases of development.

According to Kirst, new tests for Common Core English and math are relatively far along in the pipeline, with two competing consortia currently pilot-testing their materials in multiple states. California has aligned with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (in which Stanford Graduate School of Education professor Linda Darling-Hammond played a leading role) and will be pilot-testing its student assessment products through May. In contrast, the next generation of standards for K–12 science is still very much a work-in-progress, with assessment tools to follow, Kirst said.

In addition to changing how students are assessed, the Common Core will give the state a great deal more flexibility in the selection of curriculum. "The old seven year cycle of adopting textbooks is now history," Kirst said. "That's your father's Oldsmobile."

Under the new guidelines, the state will have an expedited process for endorsing core and supplemental materials that the local districts may then choose to adopt. And the state will have wide latitude to look at what's working in the other Common Core states. "California has been on its own since I've been here, from 1969, doing these materials," said Kirst, who has been involved in shaping state education policy for almost 50 years. "Now we can scan the country to see what's going on rather than go through the slower process of developing everything here."

Despite the daunting scale and complexity of what the state must develop in the next two years, Kirst concluded his remarks to the legislators on an encouraging note. "We did this before," he said. "Go back to 1995 and the current standards we have, the current accountability system, the current professional development system. In 1995, everybody was doing his or her own thing. There was no overall state framework to guide the system. There was no assessment that had a significant impact. We have done it once. I believe we can do it again."

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