

TO: Mr. Robert G. Hasson, Jr. Commissioner of Education

FROM: Julianne McLaughlin, Public Policy Scholar, University of Maine at Farmington

DATE: April 2017

SUBJECT: Implementation of Proficiency-Based Learning in Maine High School Math

Background:

In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practice began to develop the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were adopted by Maine and 45 other states in 2011. The intent of CCSS was “to ensure that all American children receive a quality, rigorous, education”¹ in the face of a changing global economy, which requires that students have stronger critical thinking skills and deeper understanding of concepts taught in the classroom. CCSS primarily focuses on revising mathematics and language arts curriculums within schools around the country.

Current Policy:

Since 2011, the adoption of CCSS has grown increasingly more controversial as a result of a number of factors. Among these have been increased opposition to the policy due to what is perceived as federal interference as well as its departure from the traditional structure of education. Furthermore, it is widely considered to be ineffective at improving education for Maine’s students, and it is also considered to hinder students’ development.

The implementation of CCSS within mathematics programs in high schools is arguably the most challenging aspect of the adoption of the standards, and it has seen the greatest amount of pushback from faculty, parents, and students alike.

As a result of the controversy, there have been a number of efforts within the state to remove CCSS from the Maine Learning Results, such as the original draft of the 2015-2016 bill, LD 1492. Furthermore, the Trump Administration has suggested removing CCSS. The question, however, is whether or not the standards are the cause of issues within Maine’s high schools, or if the standards have highlighted preexisting problems. Elimination of the standards would be necessary only if they are the source of issues in high school programs.

¹Thomas C. Frohlich, “States with the best schools,” *USA Today*, last modified January 15, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/01/15/247-wall-st-states-best-schools/21388041/>.

Research:

State of Other State High School Programs

The states with the highest ranking in public K-12 education are as follows²:

1. Massachusetts
2. New Jersey
3. Maryland
4. Vermont
5. New Hampshire
6. Connecticut
7. Wyoming
8. Pennsylvania
9. New York
10. Minnesota

Of these states, Minnesota is the only state to have not adopted the mathematics portion of CCSS. Seven out of the remaining nine schools have standards that are identical to the Common Core State Standards that the state of Maine has adopted. The two divergent states are Maryland and Pennsylvania, which have closely aligned their state standards with CCSS.

This indicates that challenges faced by schools upon implementation of CCSS are not directly correlated with the standards themselves but instead the result of other factors, which existed prior to the adoption of CCSS.

The State of Maine's High Schools

First, it is important to examine how Maine's schools are faring overall and the challenges that Maine in particular is facing. The most important aspects of this section of research included the examination of case studies posted on the Maine Department of Education's website. These case studies covered RSU 2, RSU 16, RSU 18, RSU 20, RSU 57, and the Western Maine Education Collaborative. Also important were interviews conducted with educators who are working directly with students in the field. Furthermore, two reports, being *Education Evolving: Maine's Plan for Putting Learners First* and *Gearing up to teach the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics in rural Northeast Region Schools*, were critical to the examination of Maine's schools.

² Thomas C. Frohlich, "States with the best schools," *USA Today*, last modified January 15, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/01/15/247-wall-st-states-best-schools/21388041/>.

A number of obstacles were repeated throughout the reports. Among these recurring themes were the difficulties of “meeting the needs of all students,”³ time, “[g]aining access to quality textbooks and instructional materials . . . and creating lessons plans that embody the content...”⁴

Addressing the needs of all students is a particular challenge as students come to classrooms with different levels of experience, especially during the transition from the traditional method of learning to proficiency-based learning, such as that seen with CCSS. These problems, however, are inextricably intertwined with one another. If teachers do not have access to quality textbooks and other materials, it is challenging to create lessons plan that align themselves with the content of CCSS, which therefore hinders a teacher’s ability to address the needs of all of his or her students.

The most important of these obstacles is the lack of access that teachers have to textbooks and instructional materials. According to *Gearing up to teach the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics in rural Northeast Region Schools*, 46 percent of educators reported access to materials as a challenge. Furthermore:

“fewer than 1 in 5 [educators around the country] ‘strongly agree’ that classroom resources are well-aligned to the standards and professional development is high-quality, and many are turning to online sites like Teachers Pay Teachers to find materials for their classrooms.”⁵

Research has shown that a large percentage of teachers have to search on their own for materials that aid them in the classroom, and it has been shown that “30 percent of secondary teachers are using materials from EngageNY”⁶ and Google is the number one resource that educators use to search for materials with Pinterest and Teacherspayteachers following.⁷

While the Maine Department of Education lists a few resources that teachers may use to aid in the classroom, these resources are more challenging to find through the DOE website than on Google or the websites of other state counterparts. The majority of those provided require educators to pay out of pocket to utilize. Furthermore, these resources have not been updated since 2014.

Another of the most significant problems that Maine schools are facing is community understanding of the changes that are being made in high school education, which was

³Kirk Walters, Aubrey Scheopner Torres, Toni Smith, Jennifer Ford, and (ED) Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. 2014, "Gearing up to Teach the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics in Rural Northeast Region Schools, REL 2015-031," *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 18, 2017), 8.

⁴Ibid. 8

⁵ Jaclyn Zubrzycki, “Teachers Say They Know More About the Common Core, But Challenges Linger But More Teachers Report They Feel Prepared to Teach Standards,” *Education Week*, last modified December 22, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/12/22/teachers-say-they-know-more-about-the.html?qs=common+core>.

⁶ Liana Heitin, “The Search for Common-Core Curricula: Where Are Teachers Finding Materials?,” *Education Week*, last modified April 19, 2016, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2016/04/common_core_curricula_teacher_materials.html.

⁷ Ibid.

highlighted in the case studies. In the case of RSU 2, “people lost faith and trust”⁸ in the system as “the administration went ‘underground’ with its implementation.”⁹

RSU 16, which includes Poland Regional High School (PRHS), was the first school district in the state of Maine to take on a proficiency-based learning approach long before CCSS were developed, and the implementation of their new system then faced problems which are similar to those that school districts now face in the implementation of CCSS. At the time:

“Only a small percentage of parents were on board with the vision of the school. When the high school opened, according to Medd [PRHS’ principal], the new administration did not really make the argument for their new system. ‘We just opened the school...and then it all went crazy when the reaction from the community was pretty negative,’ she remembers.”¹⁰

This reaction is the same as the reaction seen with the adoption of CCSS in 2011 as a new system was implemented with little input from the community and with little explanation.

It was found that the Maine Department of Education has limited resources for parents to use in order to fully understand and comprehend the changes made by CCSS, and there are limited resources which help parents understand how to help their children perform better in schools. It is shown that “[p]arents play perhaps the largest role in the development of their children,”¹¹ so when parents are not on board with new educational programs, it is a hindrance to student learning.

Conclusion:

Certain problems within Maine school districts were highlighted when the state chose to implement Common Core State Standards within the Maine Learning Results. The most significant of these issues include access to quality textbooks and educational materials, ability of teachers to meet the needs of all students, ability to align lesson plans with CCSS, and community support of the adoption of CCSS.

Recommendations

Instead of attempting to eliminate Common Core State Standards, the state of Maine should focus on solving the issues which have hindered student learning both before and after the adoption of CCSS.

⁸ “The Long Conversation or, ‘It’s hard, but worth it. Did I mention that it’s hard?’ RSU 2 Student-Centered Learning Implementation Case Study,” *Maine Department of Education*, date accessed October, 2016, 5.

⁹Ibid. 5.

¹⁰ “Sustained Change, Continuous Improvement Regional School Unit 16 Proficiency-Based Learning Implementation Case Study,” *Maine Department of Education*, date accessed October, 2016, 3.

¹¹Thomas C. Frohlich, “States with the best schools,” *USA Today*, last modified January 15, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/01/15/247-wall-st-states-best-schools/21388041/>.

The primary recommendation is that the state of Maine should help provide teachers with materials that will aid them in the classroom. Without adequate resources, teachers cannot devote enough time to aligning their curriculum with CCSS, and teachers also cannot devote enough time to meeting the needs of all of their students.

There are a number of ways to improve the resources to which teachers have access. However, many of these solutions, such as new textbooks and even digital textbooks, are high-cost endeavors. Although those may be the ideal, this recommendation is focused on a low-cost solution due to the continuous funding challenges that Maine schools face.

A beneficial solution is to improve teacher access to free resources that can be used without resorting to Google searches, which can generate sources that are not well aligned to CCSS. Unlike the state of Maine, other states currently provide access to free resources. For example, New York provides access to “EngageNY”, and New Hampshire provides access to “Illustrative Mathematics.” By collaborating with other state programs, resources to aid teachers, which are aligned to CCSS, may be identified, and the same resources could be provided to Maine’s teachers.

The secondary recommendation is that the state of Maine should focus on providing easily accessible and understandable materials for parents and community members who struggle to understand the changes that are being made to the entire educational system. Similarly to the primary recommendation, other states have resources that parents may access in order to help them understand the new system which was adopted with CCSS.

In solving these problems first, other issues within the education system ought to begin to resolve themselves. Teachers who have access to quality materials can devote more of their time and energy to assisting their students’ progress in becoming proficient in the standards that have been put into place with CCSS. Community support will place less pressure on the educators and will provide additional support for the students who are studying through these changes and are directly impacted by them.