

Opinions

Schools need time to implement Common Core standards

By Joshua P. Starr February 7, 2013

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The Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 45 states and the District as the foundation for what students in America's public schools need to know and be able to do. They will require our children to develop a deeper, more conceptual understanding in mathematics and English-language arts. They hold tremendous promise for improving our international competitiveness.

The standards could also trigger a sea change in education, the kind that colleges, businesses and politicians have been talking about — if we give them a true opportunity for success. Unfortunately, our school systems may be too distracted by less-worthy initiatives to give the Common Core the attention it deserves.

That is why I am calling for a three-year moratorium on federally required standardized testing nationwide. If we are serious about realizing the promise of the Common Core, we must allow our school districts to focus on the important work of curriculum and assessment development, implementation and professional development.

Most U.S. public school systems are attempting to implement at least three things at once right now: revamped accountability measures, reforms as part of the federal Race to the Top program and the Common Core State Standards. This is simply too much at one time.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law was grounded in the right intent: We must be accountable for the achievement of all children, especially those who historically have not been well served by public education. But increased use of state standardized tests has been the wrong mechanism. That's why NCLB has been ineffective at

closing the achievement gap.

I applaud Education Secretary Arne Duncan for granting waivers to more than 30 states that, in theory, unleash the creativity of their education departments to design new accountability systems.

But these same state-level departments have been hurt by the recent fiscal crisis. Moreover, they are beholden to legislators and executives whose assumptions about public education make them more likely to endorse a continued over-reliance on standardized tests to evaluate schools and educators. Where is the evidence that state departments have the capacity or political freedom to redesign accountability systems that support what students need to know in the 21st century?

Meanwhile, many districts and states are implementing changes as part of the Race to the Top competition. This includes teacher evaluation systems that rely too heavily on individual student performance on the current state standardized tests — a practice I vehemently oppose. Standardized tests were not designed to be used as profit-and-loss statements. Student data from reliable sources can be used, but an effective evaluation system must also acknowledge the complexity of being a teacher and focus on pedagogy, content knowledge and classroom management.

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And even if this practice were based on appropriate methodologies, implementation requires the alignment of data systems, training, assessments, policies and funding. This is a significant undertaking. It requires time to adapt and modify the system based on lessons learned. Getting it right is a consuming process.

The Common Core State Standards should be our primary focus. But districts around the country are spending so much time implementing new accountability measures and other supposed reforms that they are not developing the system capacity to change teaching and learning in the classroom in ways that will enable our students to achieve Common Core's promise. School districts are not investing in new curricula, assessments, professional development or data systems. Publishing companies will reap rewards by designating their products "Common Core Aligned," and districts will purchase them still lacking the capacity to use them properly.

A moratorium on standardized tests would give our school systems the ability to implement the Common Core with fidelity. It would also give the groups developing assessments aligned to the Common Core the time they need to get it right. These assessments will include performance tasks and multi-step problems. This is a vast improvement over most, if not all, current state assessments, which rely heavily on multiple-choice problems.

To be clear: I am not opposed to all standardized tests. In a context of collaborative professional learning, they have their place. They are an entry point to further analysis among highly trained educators and can help parents, staff and all in the school community ask better questions. I also support accountability. During the moratorium, accountability for schools and districts could be determined using a variety of sources, including Advanced Placement exams, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), graduation rates, the dropout rate and student work.

But the foundation of any meaningful accountability system in education is a strong curriculum delivered by a well-trained, highly engaged teacher. The Common Core gives us the opportunity to build that foundation on the correct things. We need time to get it right.

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