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The Battle for Higher Standards

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Four years ago, the Idaho State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts. This set off a chain of events that focused attention on how Idaho schools were preparing students for college and career success. It also started an emotional dialog about perceived federal influence on what and how students are taught. To counter the misperceptions and misinformation, the Board and Department of Education established a strong connection with higher education and worked with business leaders across the state to advocate for the importance of high standards for Idaho's students. As Idaho transitioned to the new standards, the state joined a consortium to provide a new assessment aligned with the higher standards. The new standards are in place along with an implementation plan for the assessment. Idaho students will now graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the 21st Century. Whether a high school graduate chooses to go on to college, professional-technical school, the workforce or the military, he or she will be better prepared.

In the aftermath of the federal mandates imposed through No Child Left Behind, the state-led effort to establish common math and English standards across states seemed a welcome change in the approach to improving student achievement and success. However, the effort to ensure students were ready for college or the workforce became the political target of those who distrust federal mandates and fear a nationalized education agenda bent on social engineering. The standards became intertwined with NSA spying, data mining and federal grants for education with strings attached.

Despite being one of the reddest states in the Union and in the face of large-scale political and public opposition, Idaho has emerged as a leader in adopting higher content standards in K-12 math and English/language arts. It has done so by establishing partnerships among K-12 education, higher education, and the business community to promote a more ambitious education agenda for the state.

The State

Idaho, bordering six other states and one country, has a vast geography but a small population of just 1.5 million, which includes 300,000 school-aged children. The Gem State's economy depends largely on agriculture and natural resources, but that is changing with the development of a solid technology industry in the state's capitol of Boise. Idaho is a conservative state with a balanced budget amendment that enforces tough choices for legislators with limited dollars and limitless priorities.

Idaho, like many other states, has recognized the need for a new direction in its education system. The statistics are discouraging. While close to 90 percent of students finish high school, few go on to college and even fewer graduate. Forty percent of those who do enter college need remediation. Only 39 percent of Idahoans 25 to 34 years old have even a one-year postsecondary degree or certificate.

The State Board of Education, which oversees education in Idaho from kindergarten through college, has long focused on creating a seamless system of expectations and competencies by raising graduation requirements to align with college and career entrance requirements. But still, Idaho's academic standards have been too low. Teachers complained that there were too many standards but too few critical-thinking skills required and overall low expectations for student learning.

The Common Core

At a meeting of the nation's state superintendents more than seven years ago, a handful of school chiefs began talking about charting a new course for US students. After more than a decade of standards-based education, they determined that time had come to pool state efforts and raise expectations for kids in the core subjects of math and reading.

Why should a student be deemed proficient in Idaho but go to Colorado or Washington and be academically disadvantaged? States needed clearer, higher, and comparable standards that would be aligned with college and career expectations and be as ambitious as those of the countries that lead the world in education.

The first meeting garnered interest from more than 45 states, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative was born. Idaho had a seat at the table from the beginning, bringing teams of teachers and stakeholders together. In May 2009, Governor Otter and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna signed a memorandum of understanding to be part of the process.

Next, the Idaho Department of Education mounted a campaign to inform educators, higher education, and business groups about the standards. These efforts resulted in a solid foundation of support in Idaho—in contrast to states that skipped these steps and suffered early public setbacks in what proved to be a long and contentious fight over the CCSS.

The Department's plan focused primarily on educators, who had been asking for reform. In addition to inviting teacher leaders to any national group convening on the new standards, the Department's staff went on the road to talk about them. More than 20 community meetings were held at schools throughout the state—not only to allow for public feedback but to provide an opportunity for educators to visit with content experts about the CCSS.

It was important to have concrete comparisons between the CCSS and states' previous standards in order to respond to misinformation being circulated about how they compared. So in Idaho, the Department gathered a group of teachers, who found that while the state and Common Core English/Language Arts standards were nearly 100 percent aligned, only slightly more than half of the math standards were a "good" or "excellent" match—in general, Idaho's math standards were low compared to those in the Core.

Meanwhile, other groups began to play a critical role in Idaho's actions to raise school standards and improve K-12 assessments. English and math professors reviewed the CCSS for their alignment with college expectations and voiced their support. Business groups and the Idaho Workforce Development Council looked at and approved the career competencies as well. The Department of Education was poised to raise the standards, with the strong backing of education, business, and government groups.

Idaho's policy-making process helped get the standards approved. Unlike states in which the superintendent can adopt standards unilaterally, Idaho has a thorough process of checks and balances that helped mitigate much of the criticism that plagued other states. Standards must be approved by the State Board; go through a public comment period; and be approved again by the State Board, the governor's office, and ultimately the House and Senate education committees.

Those committees both approved the standards unanimously in 2011. The state also stepped up to fund the effort a year later. While Idaho was still suffering from the recession, its schools had an influx of more than \$20 million in funds to implement the CCSS from money allocated by the legislature, plus a 2012 professional-development grant from the Joe and Kathryn Albertson Foundation. It seemed like higher standards were on a glide path to implementation.

All that changed in 2013.

It's been said that when Utah sneezes, Idaho gets a cold. While Idaho was working on implementation of the CCSS, trouble was brewing in Utah. National conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the CATO Institute were starting to label the CCSS a "federal takeover," claiming a loss of local control.

A cottage industry emerged of disgruntled Core committee members and conservative think tanks, who started rallying parents and went as far as to call the Common Core "Obama-Core." One of the first battlegrounds was the state of Utah, which ultimately decided to keep the CCSS but backed out of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

In 2013, Idaho legislators began to be hit by questions about the adoption of the CCSS and what the state had "given up" or "signed away" in exchange for federal funding and control. Accusations ranged from the trivial to the bizarre.

In the latter category, some claimed that kids would be monitored electronically or read pornography. Others were sure that sensitive data about their religious beliefs and family income were going to be collected. The fire was further fueled when conservative commentator Glenn Beck said that progressives snuck the CCSS through in the dead of night, adding, "Besides being dumber, our kids are going to be indoctrinated with extreme leftist ideology."

The Idaho Department of Education briefed legislators and answered questions from the public. But what kept the state strong was a combination of leadership, a non-partisan coalition spearheaded by business leaders, strong partnerships with higher education, and continuing professional development for teachers.

Support from the Idaho Business Community

The Idaho business community overwhelmingly supports the Idaho Core standards—not just because they are good for students, but also because they are good for Idaho's economy. A highly educated and skilled workforce is the lifeblood of Idaho business, just as water is the lifeblood for the state's farmers.

A case in point is what happened to Idaho businessman Bob Lokken a few years ago. Lokken is vice chair of Idaho Business for Education, a group of 88 businesses from across Idaho that is working to improve the state's education system. The group is a key player in the widespread support of the CCSS in the education and business communities.

Several years ago Lokken sold his company, ProClarity, to Microsoft, with the understanding that it would keep the company's high-paying jobs in Boise for two years. Not long after those two years had passed, Microsoft moved all the jobs to the Seattle area because it couldn't find the software engineers it needed in Boise.

Lokken has since started a new company, White Cloud Analytics, and now is experiencing the same shortage of software engineers in growing his business. That's why Lokken and other business leaders in Idaho are so supportive of the Idaho Core standards.

They believe the standards are essential if Idaho is going to create the pipeline of educated students necessary to build the kind of workforce it needs for the 21st-century economy. Indeed, studies show that more than 60 percent of the jobs in Idaho will require a postsecondary credential by the year 2018. Lokken says that it will be nearly impossible for the state to hit the 60 percent goal without the CCSS.

The state's old academic standards have not prepared students for the rigors of postsecondary education, which contributed to Idaho's having one of the lowest go-on rates in the country, one of the highest drop-out rates, and a daunting remediation rate—all problems that educators and business leaders believe the CCSS can alleviate. Besides raising the bar for what students learn in math and English, they give students the skills employers want and need, including the abilities to think critically, analyze information, draw conclusions about that information, and communicate orally and in writing.

For Idaho businesses, the bottom line is this: If the state can't get more students to stay in school and obtain postsecondary credentials, it will be nearly impossible to build strong businesses and a vibrant economy in the state. Without educated workers, Idaho risks losing more companies like ProClarity to other states, and existing businesses will have trouble growing. Making matters worse, it will be more difficult for Idaho to attract new businesses, especially the kind that pay good wages.

Business leaders are concerned about the opposition that has grown against the CCSS in Idaho and other states. That's why Idaho Business for Education helped organize a coalition of diverse stakeholders to help see that the standards are successfully defended and continue to be implemented in Idaho.

That statewide coalition, Idahoans for Excellence in Education, has grown to 31 members. Nearly every education stakeholder group has joined the coalition, including the Idaho Education Association, the Idaho School Boards Association, the Idaho School Administrators Association, and the State Board of Education. Every one of the presidents of Idaho's public higher education institutions joined, and they released a collective letter of support for the CCSS. The coalition also includes the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry and several Chambers of Commerce, including the Idaho's largest, the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce.

The coalition continues to hold regular meetings to discuss how each group is supporting the CCSS. In addition, the coalition partnered with the Idaho Department of Education on a public-awareness campaign funded by the GE Foundation. The \$150,000 campaign featured coalition members and focused on helping Idaho parents understand the standards and their benefits. It included extensive use of social media such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook, along with public-service announcements.

Support from Higher Education

Creating a strong partnership with higher education wasn't easy, since historically, K-12 education and higher education in Idaho have not had deep, systemic connections. The strongest evidence for this comes from Idaho students' high English and math remediation rates when they go to college. But through the adoption of the CCSS and participation in SBAC, the relationship between the schools and higher education was strengthened.

In the past, instead of communicating across the K-12/higher education boundary to better align curricula and instruction so that students exited high school better prepared for college, Idaho's colleges and universities constructed extensive remediation programs to address the problem of student underperformance. But in the past few years, several events positioned the state to make rapid progress toward establishing a seamless K-16 system, leading to improved statewide educational outcomes.

In 2010 the State Board of Education set a goal that 60 percent of Idahoans ages 25 to 34 would have a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2020. They then developed the Complete College Idaho plan to reach this goal. The plan involves K-12 education, higher education, business, industry, and communities in an effort to improve Idaho education and workforce preparedness.

The Complete College Idaho plan outlines what needs to be done to create a seamless education system with improved outcomes. It includes strengthening the K-12 pipeline by, among other things, increasing the rigor in K-12 education through adoption of the CCSS and assessing college and career readiness through adoption of the SBAC assessments.

With better preparation, fewer students are likely to need remedial courses at the postsecondary level. For those who do, Idaho's higher education institutions have undertaken a significant remediation reform effort to increase student success.

All eight of Idaho's two- and four-year institutions have agreed to rethink how they deliver remediation. The goal of this reform initiative is to reduce the number of non-college-credit-bearing courses many students must take so that they move more quickly into credit-bearing courses.

In and of itself, the remediation reform initiative doesn't provide a natural connection to K-12 education, since it is being undertaken only by higher education. But when combined with another important initiative, general education reform, the bridge begins to span the gap between K-12 and college.

The primary goal of the general education reform initiative is to establish common course learning outcomes for all general education courses at Idaho's two- and four-year colleges and universities. Like the K-12 CCSS, higher education's general education courses will focus on what students should know and be able to do upon completion.

Once these outcomes are fully established, they can be disseminated to K-12 educators to provide clear targets for public school teachers and their students. In order to improve educational outcomes at any level of the system, clear targets are key for students, faculty, administrators, and staff. The common course outcomes will be the bull's eye of the targets.

Reforming college remediation programs and aligning general education course outcomes helps position Idaho to be a leader in raising educational standards. However, it was Idaho's adoption of the CCSS and the SBAC assessments that will ensure that the students who enter college are strong in the core subject areas of English language arts and mathematics.

It is important that both the standards and the assessments be adopted, because in K-12 classrooms, what gets tested gets taught. Additionally, both the standards and the assessments emphasize the importance of college and career readiness at the conclusion of the 12th grade, and both emphasize the important role higher education plays in attaining this goal.

SBAC has been the launch pad for much of the work higher education has recently done in the state concerning the standards. Early in the development process, the consortium asked each of its states to identify a "higher education lead to work with higher education institutions in the state and recruit faculty members for key SBAC committees and work groups and to regularly communicate with higher education about the CCSS and SBAC."

Prior to the development of SBAC's assessments, Idaho's colleges and universities knew very little about the CCSS and even less about SBAC. Thus, regular communication with higher education about the development of the standards and assessments, about what was being asked of Idaho higher education in the process, and about the long-term goals of both the standards and SBAC provided an important opportunity to disseminate critical information and to continue building the bridge between K-12 and higher education.

SBAC developed college-readiness definitions for English language arts and mathematics, defined achievement levels for 11th-grade students, and explained their impact on students' entry into higher education. When the SBAC higher education lead presented this framework to Idaho's higher education leaders, the robust discussions that ensued resulted in the establishment of an 11th-12th-grade college-readiness framework committee. Its members are K-12 educators, administrators, and counselors, along with higher education mathematics and English faculty.

The conversations that have occurred at meetings of this group have revealed significant knowledge gaps. For example, one mathematics professor didn't know what courses were offered in math at the secondary level, specifically in the senior year. A counselor from a small rural school district on the committee named two courses,

but then went on to inform the professor that they have only one math teacher and can't offer any more. Reality checks like this one have occurred on both sides of the K-12/higher education chasm, with the SBAC 11th-grade college-readiness framework acting as the critical catalyst for these important realizations.

Another example of the important role SBAC has played in stimulating important communication comes from higher education. Early in the development process, SBAC realized that various states' preparedness for the standards and their assessments ranged from quite prepared to very unprepared. Consequently, the consortium developed a survey that asked faculty about their familiarity with the standards and SBAC, the political context within which they were being implemented, and the quality and extensiveness of communication and organizational structures in place linking higher education, K-12 education, business, and the legislature.

The results showed that higher education leadership believed that their education faculty was only slightly more familiar with the CCSS and SBAC than their arts and sciences faculty. All, essentially, were only minimally aware of the reform efforts.

The survey resulted in a plan to have education faculty fan out across their respective campuses and give presentations to faculty and administrators about the CCSS and SBAC. The goal was for all faculty and administrators to participate in a presentation before the end of 2014 spring semester.

SBAC had provided a PowerPoint stack of general information that could be used to help explain the importance of higher education to both of these initiatives. This stack was sent to the identified faculty with a note stating that they could adapt and modify the slides any way they saw fit. Feedback from the presentations was positive.

Implementing both the CCSS and SBAC in Idaho has acted, in short, as a much-needed catalyst for conversations between K-12 and higher education. These conversations have been shaped and enhanced in important ways by the remediation and general education reforms. All of these efforts align with the state's Complete College Idaho plan, which shows how all of the pieces fit together to form a seamless K-16 system capable of fully supporting the efforts to achieve the 60 percent goal.

Leadership from the Idaho State Department of Education

Back on the K-12 level, the State Department of Education has approached CCSS implementation in a number of ways. Its primary focus has been on reaching teachers and principals with sustained, coherent, effective, and ongoing professional development funded by the Idaho legislature. Leveraging the talent in Idaho's schools and institutions of higher education has been a key component in the state's effort to build human capital.

In 2013, the Department conceived and created the Idaho Core Coach Network, with the support of local National Writing Project affiliates. The network led teacher representatives in an in-depth exploration of the key instructional shifts required by the CCSS. Each teacher leader invested more than 300 hours in creating, delivering, and reviewing lessons and units.

One critical component of this strategy was eight face-to-face training days during the school year, which were vital in creating a safe place where teachers could take risks in using new strategies in the classroom. In addition, a rigorous online course was delivered in eight units from October until May.

So it was built, but would they come? In its inaugural year, the coaches—all master teachers taking two-year leaves to serve their regions—trained more than 225 teacher leaders from approximately 100 districts serving 90 percent of all Idaho students. But the goal was not just to train a couple hundred teachers but to replicate that training in local districts.

The results can be seen all over the state now, but they vary according to the local resources and needs of the district. Thus, the twin aims of statewide coherence and local flexibility are beginning to be realized.

By investing in the time it takes to effect change in something as complex as teaching and learning, by building local capacity and honoring teachers as leaders, and by providing parallel training to administrators to help reinforce instructional change, the Department hopes to create a platform for sustainability.

This effort has been enthusiastically received across the state. As one teacher leader testified,

It is my privilege to be part of a program that honors what I already know, teaches me ways to share my knowledge with my colleagues across my school and across the state and continually asks me to change my classroom practice in meaningful ways that align to the Common Core. I feel completely supported by the Idaho Core Teachers Network, knowing that I have a Common Core regional specialist that I can call on with any type of question or concern. I know the Idaho Core Teachers Network will have a large-scale impact on teachers and students because it isn't a one-shot, one-size-fits-all, top-down model. It will continue to grow, responding and changing based on the needs of the districts and teachers that it is supporting, and all while connecting Idaho's classrooms in ways that haven't been accomplished before.

In the past year, the State Department of Education has also established regional math centers based at four public universities around the state: Idaho State University, the University of Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College, and Boise State University. Each center is directed by a faculty member, who works with a number of full-time regional math specialists to serve the needs of the district's schools. This program is the next phase of a successful five-year-old statewide math initiative that has focused on mathematical thinking.

Idaho's schools are diverse and geographically dispersed, which means they need a statewide system of regional support for ongoing, high-quality professional development and support for all teachers of mathematics. Providing localized centers with experts in mathematics education supports the efforts made by teachers, districts, and communities across the state to implement the CCSS.

Specialists also meet with districts and design programs to address the local needs of schools. The direct higher education connection facilitates a link to current research on the most effective instructional models and methods, which informs the work of the centers.

But their work goes beyond creating a statewide regional infrastructure for regionally focused and sustained, high-quality professional development for teachers. It also includes Idaho's CCSS implementation, the identification of skilled teacher leaders, the development of digital resources to support mathematics teaching, research on professional development, the establishment of studio classrooms, observations and critiques of instruction in a constructive environment, and support for deeper content knowledge in concert with a greater knowledge of instructional strategies.

Working with over 100 Idaho public school districts this year, this effort has been enthusiastically received by the field. As one teacher participant put it, "Great insights to improve instruction. Thank you for your continued support to help us help and support our students!"

With implementation of the CCSS entering its third year in fall 2014, support for them has strengthened. Despite an upcoming election and a strong conservative movement in the state, most legislators who supported the adoption and implementation of the standards continue to stand by their decisions. Idaho's governor and State Board of Education members also have not wavered in their support of both the standards and the assessments.

The Idaho experience makes it clear that successful implementation of higher standards in math and English/language arts takes the effort of a broad group of stakeholders. The business community has been the catalyst for coalition building and information dissemination to the public. Idaho institutions of higher education are working with K-12 in an unprecedented effort to link systems. And schoolteachers are receiving focused professional development to ensure higher levels of instruction in the classroom. This approach continues to help policymakers to stay the course and has made Idaho a case study of successful CCSS implementation and public-policy creation.

However, the story is not yet finished. Implementation continues to be a major challenge. Teachers need ongoing professional development in order to teach students how to master the standards. Issues related to testing need to be worked out. Concerns from parents and legislators must continue to be addressed. Our collective success in these efforts will determine whether our future generations will have the skills and abilities to lead successful, productive lives. It is critical that they do.