Policy Recommendations for College and Career Ready Standards in Secondary Schools
Introduction

NASSP has long supported the adoption and successful implementation of college and career ready standards that are designed to prepare all students for success in postsecondary education and training. To ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, student proficiency must be measured against a consistent set of high academic standards that will open career and college options to students after they graduate. Such standards will promote equity, comparability of results, efficiency, cost effectiveness, consistency, collaboration, and innovation (NASSP, 2013).

As a condition for receiving a flexibility waiver under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states were required to adopt a set of more-rigorous college and career ready standards. As of February 2014, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) and tailored them to suit the unique needs of their states. States that chose not to adopt Common Core have worked with their institutions of higher education to certify that students who have met the standards will be prepared for entry-level college coursework.

The standards—which were reviewed by teachers, school leaders, and education experts across the country—specify the knowledge and skills that students must possess to be college and career ready upon graduation from high school. These standards reset expectations to go beyond high school graduation and encompass successful completion of postsecondary education and training. Compared with international standards, the English language arts standards, in particular, raise the bar for the nation’s middle level and high schools by making literacy—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—a shared responsibility across all content areas.

Instead of simply solving math problems, students will also be expected to know how and why to apply mathematics concepts to real-world situations using higher-order thinking skills. It is important to note that college and career ready standards set expectations for what students should know and be able to do, but the standards themselves are not a curriculum—they are a road map to the how. They act as a guide, which allows for state and local autonomy in deciding both the curriculum and the teaching strategies that states and districts will use to meet the standards.

Two consortia of states as well as ACT, Pearson, the American Institutes for Research, and other private vendors are developing new assessments in mathematics and English language arts that are aligned with the Common Core. Field testing began in spring 2014 and will require states to invest heavily in instructional materials that are aligned with the assessments and to ensure that they have adequate technology and infrastructure to complete the online assessments.

Success of the new standards is dependent upon well-thought-out and long-term implementation efforts in states and districts that set reasonable expectations for educators. Standards are not fixed entities and should undergo a process of continual review and improvement. As part of that review, states should sunset outdated standards and assessments to create more cognitive bandwidth for new college and career ready standards. The initial implementation of college and career ready standards should be viewed as a culture shift—a long-term process that will take years to accomplish. Further, the implementation of the standards should be viewed as an ongoing process of continuous, incremental improvement.

Leadership from principals is pivotal to ensuring the successful implementation of college and career ready standards in their schools. A 2014 report from the Fordham Institute that examined the implementation of Common Core in select...
school districts said that success “hinges on principals clearly prioritizing the standards as the basis for instruction and professional learning in their buildings” (Cristol & Ramsey, p. 10). Nonetheless, principals across the nation report concerns about the implementation in their states and the inadequate training they have received to help them ensure that their teachers are able to change instructional practices. The Center on Education Policy (Kober, McIntosh, & Rentner, 2013) surveyed states in 2013 on Common Core implementation and found that only 21 states estimated that more than 50% of their principals had participated in Common Core–related professional development, and only 11 states noted that more than 75% of that group had been served. “If changes in instruction are to occur on schedule and if students are to be well-prepared to master the standards, then teachers and principals must receive effective professional development to aid them through this transition” (p. 9), the report stated.

**Recommendations for Federal Policymakers**

- Abandon the punitive provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and provide significant financial resources for states to implement college and career ready standards and the related assessments with fidelity.

- Delay for two years the use of new assessment results for high-stakes accountability purposes. A two-year transition will allow for sufficient experience with a fully validated and implemented assessment system consisting of preassessments, performance-based assessments, and summative assessments all accompanied by meaningful and timely feedback to teachers and schools. Specifically, we call for a delay in invoking penalties and sanctions related to test scores on schools, principals, and teachers.

- Eliminate the mixed message sent by current “dual testing” practices in which schools are held accountable for scores on “old state assessments,” but teachers are expected to be engaging in instructional practices that prepare students for new, yet unseen, assessments.

- Encourage states to eliminate outdated state assessments and provide incentives for them to participate in field tests of new college and career ready assessments.

- Continue to fund ongoing, job-embedded professional development and updated preservice training to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to implement college and career ready standards and administer assessments aligned with those standards.

- Enhance the capacity of state education agencies to develop resources for middle level and high schools with high student mobility rates and significant proportions of low-income students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and low-achieving students to help all students meet high expectations.

- Because college and career ready standards recognize that literacy is a shared responsibility across all content areas, enact a comprehensive federal literacy program from birth to grade 12 to ensure that literacy is incorporated across the curriculum and that struggling students receive targeted interventions in reading and writing.

- Provide funding for research-based programs that are known to improve math instruction in middle level and high school and make targeted assistance available to students who are struggling in math.

- Collect and disseminate the results, data, and best practices of states that have been successful in implementing college and career ready standards.
- Conduct research on the types of professional development that teachers and principals consider the most valuable in implementing college and career ready standards to help states make wise investments in this area.

- Provide funding to ensure broadband infrastructure and adequate hardware that will support online assessments and professional development for teachers and principals to incorporate technology into instruction.

**Recommendations for State Policymakers**

- Adopt a 5–10 year plan to appropriately implement the new, higher standards along with a plan to sustain the changes wrought by their adoption.

- Eliminate outdated state assessments that are not aligned with college and career ready standards and collaborate with principals and teachers to field test new assessments and a process for perfecting them.

- Maximize the flexibility provided by the US Department of Education to delay penalties and sanctions related to test scores on schools, principals, and teachers.

- Develop an implementation plan that reexamines current high school graduation requirements, addresses teacher and principal preparation programs, and includes professional development activities.

- In collaboration with local education authorities, design appropriately aligned curricula to meet college and career ready standards and provide financial resources for updated textbooks and fully aligned instructional materials.

- Also in collaboration with local education authorities, provide robust support services and ongoing professional development for principals, assistant principals, and instructional leaders to build the capacity of schools around college and career ready standards.

- Provide resources to local education authorities in the form of grants, research, and professional expertise to help them build their capacity to more effectively meet the needs of every student.

- Ensure that principal evaluation systems include multiple measures of student growth and achievement and also consider the other leadership responsibilities within a principal’s sphere of influence, such as professional growth and learning, school planning and progress, school culture, professional qualities and instructional leadership, and stakeholder support and engagement.

**Recommendations for District Policymakers**

- Continue the process of ongoing professional development that is designed to shift the culture of schools and classrooms and build the capacity of all teachers in middle level and high schools, particularly in the areas of cross-content literacy, including argumentative writing, higher-order thinking skills, application of lessons to real-world situations, and active engagement of all students.

- Ensure that teachers and principals have time to collaborate with one another and provide professional development opportunities for instructional staff members to help build their capacity to teach to higher standards and provide students with the supports they need to achieve them.

- Focus principal training on instructional leadership—not school management—which will help principals and assistant principals to become
well-versed in college and career ready standards and give them the ability to coach their teaching staff.

- Support principals in setting, developing, and implementing a robust culture of high expectations in their schools, which is critical to transforming teaching and learning and improving student academic achievement.

- Evaluate interim assessments to ensure that they provide timely and useful feedback to principals, teachers, and parents on student learning.

- Implement schoolwide initiatives that emphasize close reading, various forms of writing, and listening and speaking across all content areas.

- Implement interdisciplinary numeracy initiatives that reinforce mathematics skills across all content areas, especially in science courses.

- Facilitate vertical articulation discussions between middle level and high schools and their feeder schools to ensure K–12 alignment of mathematics and literacy curricula with the college and career ready standards.

- Assess and align all schools’ technology capacity to accommodate the requirements for computer-based assessments.

- Ensure that students have multiple opportunities to practice with new hardware and software before state assessments are administered.

- Hold public awareness forums with educators, parents, and community leaders to explain the rationale for adopting college and career ready standards and their aligned assessments and discuss how best to implement them.

- Communicate directly with parents to help them understand the value of college and career ready standards and changes that will be made to teaching and student learning in schools and to encourage them to allow their children to participate in field tests and other assessments.

### Resources


About NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and national voice for principals, assistant principals, and all school leaders in middle level and high schools from across the United States and in 36 countries. The association connects and engages school leaders through advocacy, research, education, and student programs. NASSP advocates on behalf of all school leaders to ensure the success of each student and strengthens school leadership practices through the design and delivery of high-quality professional learning experiences. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Association of Student Councils.