

***The Impact of National Preschool-Grade 12 Educational Reforms on the  
Preparation of the Future Educator Workforce in the USA***

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**Abstract**

The USA has been facing several new reform initiatives in education that directly impact the instruction and assessment of elementary and secondary students (P-12). There have not been so many changes at once in recent history. Some are calling this the "perfect storm" in education or an "educational tsunami." Emerging from the recent "Race to the Top" federal initiative, came the creation of the Common Core, a set of college and career ready standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts/literacy and mathematics, adopted by a majority of the States. These standards were designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to take credit bearing introductory courses in two- or four-year college programs or enter the workforce.

The implementation of these standards has been controversial and far-reaching. What and how students learn, are taught, and assessed are a few of the ways that P-12 students are affected. Teachers are re-examining the curriculum, instructional strategies and materials, and assessment techniques as well. In addition, these reform efforts have led to changes in the ways in which teachers and administrators are evaluated. Finally, these those involved in preparing the workforce of future educators (i.e., teachers, administrators and other school personnel) have had to review, re-examine, and revise their programs to meet the overall goal of these changes - to improve student performance. This session will examine the ways that educator preparation is addressing these changes with examples of promising practices.

Keywords: educational reform, educator preparation, P-12, United States (U.S.)

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## **Introduction**

The United States has been faced with numerous educational reforms, most originating at the national level, that have impacted all levels of education from early childhood (i.e., primary – P) through college (i.e., P-20). These reforms have emanated from federal incentives (e.g., Race to the Top) and national professional organizations (e.g., National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers led the development of the Common Core Standards). The implementation of these reforms has impacted all aspects of the educational enterprise including: curriculum standards, instruction, assessment of students, evaluation of teachers and administrators, and the preparation of current and future educators.

In addition to being widespread, the effect has been immediate. Implementation of most of these reforms has been immediate. Because of the speedy implementation, there has been little time allowed for a pilot or trial phase and now there has been “pushback” from parents, teachers, and administrators that has finally resulted in policymakers easing up on the timelines and requirements.

## **Literature Review**

### **Types of Reforms**

One of the major federal initiatives that has provided direction and support for these reforms has been the Race to the Top program. Created by the U. S. Department of Education (2014), four billion dollars was provided to the states for competitive grants to address educational reforms in several areas: adopting standards and assessments that would prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and compete in the global economy; building data systems that would measure student growth and inform teachers and principals/school administrators about how they could improve instruction; recruiting, rewarding, and retaining teachers and principals especially in schools that are in most need; and turning around the lowest achieving schools.

Race to the Top was the impetus for the creation of several initiatives which have driven the agenda for P-20 public education in the U.S. Emanating from the need to better prepare the P-12 students to be college and career ready and more competitive in a global workforce, the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers directed the development of the Common Core Standards, which have been adopted by 44 of the 50 states. These standards were developed with support from numerous educators, policymakers, and business leaders across the U.S. Scholarly research was the foundation for their development along with other critical criteria to include critical content and higher order thinking skills, consistency across the states, alignment with best indicators of college and career success, improvement based upon standards of top-performing nations and current state standards, and evidence-based outcomes. Several additional reforms in the form of policies and implementation tools have also been developed to support the new standards. These include curriculum and instructional tools and teaching materials, comprehensive assessment systems that replace the current state assessment systems and that can provide specific annual feedback about students and teachers, and a more extensive use of technology in instruction and assessment (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

The call for a much more comprehensive assessment resulted in the evolution of two state-led consortia that began to provide annual assessment data to schools in the 2014-2015 academic year. These included the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced). In 2014-2015 PARCC has 11 states and the District of Columbia (it originally had 23 states in 2010) in its consortium and Smarter Balanced has 18 states (it had 31 states). (Note: The 2010 total exceeds 50 as territories were included in the count.) The downward trend in assessment consortia participation is worth attention later in this paper.

These consortia were charged with creating the common assessments to be used by states in measuring annual student performance and eventually college and career readiness. These results will also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and school principals and will become of an annual evaluation for these educators. Eventually the plan is to identify the institutions where individual teachers were trained (i.e., where they received the training to earn eligibility for teacher certification) and ultimately use these results to evaluate teacher training institutions in the U.S. Thus, if a student performs very well on the annual assessment, this assessment would provide a higher evaluation for his/her teacher, and ultimately the institution where the teacher received training would be given a high evaluation as well. Note that the intent is that student tests scores would only become part of a teacher's annual evaluation, usually no more than 50%, depending on the state where employed.

The continued impact of these initiatives has effected the evaluation and accreditation of current educator preparation programs. Much change has been and continues to be made by states in terms of the ways that they approve and sanction colleges, universities, and other entities (e.g., school systems, alternate organizations such as Teach for America) which provide teacher training that leads to licensure eligibility. The Common Core and all of its reform initiatives have become incorporated into these programs and thus create additional challenges to these organizations.

All of these related initiatives have implications for the extensive use of technology. Each aspect is dependent upon and requires access to longitudinal data systems, a sophisticated technology infrastructure within schools and school systems and individual classrooms. Both instruction and assessments will be heavily reliant on the use of technology. This has increased the demands for access, training, and sustainability.

Each component of these national reforms are interdependent and require ongoing planning, monitoring, and support, including adequate financial resources and qualified personnel. The stakes are high for states, their school districts, educator training institutions, faculty, administrators, and students.

### **Impact on P-12 Schools**

Elementary and secondary schools (P-12) have undergoing swift and substantive changes over the past five years. With an emphasis on a better prepared citizenry, students, teachers, administrators, and parents have had to consider education as a

lifelong experience with serious, focused goals after high school graduation that will internationally competitive and prepared to function in a global economy. Students will need to show readiness for both college and career.

The new standards focus on both content and skills in English language arts and mathematics includes literacy and critical thinking and problem solving in other disciplines. A shift in literacy has engaged readers in more applied passages, with less emphasis on literature and more emphasis on literacy in multiple disciplines. Mathematics still requires a strong foundation but with more emphasis on preparing students to apply more demanding concepts and procedures in real world challenges. Teachers are building more lessons that enable students to demonstrate procedural fluency, conceptual understanding and problem solving (Rothman, R. (2013).

Emerging from the more interdisciplinary approach has been more emphasis on “STEM” programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). Resources abound for STEM program development, enhanced curriculum integration, and educator training with the intent of preparing a more skilled workforce to address current and future needs in the U.S. Collaborations and partnerships between business, industry, and educational organizations are encouraged and part of many external funding opportunities (Education and Human Resources STEM Workforce Development Subcommittee. (2014).

The nature of instruction has been changed as a result of the new standards. Many teachers have had to change their approach to teaching. With more rigorous assessments, teachers have had to incorporate higher level thinking skills and writing components in their assignments, both tasks to which the current generation of students has shown resistance (Meador, 2014).

Since there is more emphasis on interdisciplinary work, there has been a shift in working collaboratively among teachers. Special education teachers (i.e., those working with students with disabilities or special gifts and talents) have already led the charge through co-teaching which has been widely adapted in many elementary and secondary schools across the U.S. It is from the field of special education that one of the most widely used, newer instructional approaches has been implemented – the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The UDL has broad implications for both instruction and assessment as it provides a framework to address the individual needs of the learner. It outlines multiple approaches for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone as it contains flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for the unique needs of the learner. Assessments are also using UDL as the framework by which all learners can be accommodated. The framework provides learners with multiple means of representation (e.g., ways to perceive; options for language, mathematical expressions, and symbols; options for comprehension); multiple means of action and expression (e.g., options for physical action; options for expression and communication; options for executive functions); and multiple means of engagement (e.g., options for recruiting interest; options for sustaining effort and persistence; options for self-regulation) with the goal being to create learners who are resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed, and purposeful and motivated (Center for Applied Special Technology (2011).

The changing nature of the assessments has also impacted what goes on in schools. Highly dependent on a strong technology infrastructure, teachers need their schools to have the required band width, technology tools, and other resources to be able to fully engage their students in both instruction and the required assessments. In addition to access to the technology tools and resources, there must be adequate support for professional development and training for teachers, educators, and ultimately students. Finally, ongoing support, oversight, and maintenance are required to sustain the level of technology required.

Although assessments are both formative and summative in nature, they too require instruction as the format is new to many students and teachers as well. There is also concern about the amount of time required for these assessments (Matsuda, 2015). This will likely be a continued challenge as these reforms become more institutionalized. Some states have been implementing the Common Core for five years so there is preliminary assessment data available, which seems to a minimal (i.e., 1 point) increase in fourth grade reading scores and others are finding a slight dip in scores. However, it is too soon to draw any major conclusions. The assessments are too new and too varied. Another challenge facing U.S. educators is that states have multiple versions of these assessments: those created by PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and individual states. Thus, making comparisons and drawing inferences presents and will continue to present challenges for the psychometricians who must analyze these results (Loveless, 2015).

### **Impact on Educator Preparation**

Higher education has had to be responsive to the Common Core Standards in numerous ways. Clearly the standards were developed to prepare students to be college and career ready. Historically many students entering college required remedial courses in reading and math. The results of the national response to having higher standards and evidence of readiness for credit-bearing college courses will soon become known.

The increasingly high costs of a college education in the U.S. have created an additional sense of urgency and support for elevating the standards of those entering college. With tuition being spent on non-credit remedial courses, there is more attention being paid to ensuring that students are better prepared, have a clearly outlined college curricular program, and ongoing monitoring to support success and a timely completion. One desired outcome is to have higher student retention rates from students who are more prepared for the rigors of college, thus reducing the need for remedial courses at colleges and universities (Shumski, 2013). There is also much national energy focused on providing free or low-cost tuition at community colleges to reduce the overall costs of a college education (Education Commission of the States, 2015).

These reforms have had and will continue to have an impact on the current and future workforce of educators in the U.S. Future teachers will need to be adequately prepared with the tools necessary to teach the Common Core Standards. This includes a deep understanding of the content in their preparation area, knowledge and skills in instruction of the content and procedures for the multiple assessments, including extensive knowledge of the Universal Design for Learning, and critical

analysis skills that will be helpful in drawing inferences and using student performance results to make data driven decisions for future instruction. Future educators, including teachers, administrators, and school counselors, will need to have deep content knowledge, high level skills in the use of technology, and new skills in data literacy. They must be prepared to keep their focus on student performance, for it is that outcome that is becoming a major part of their annual evaluations. These challenges are coming at a time when enrollments in educator preparation are dropping and educator preparation accreditation standards are being elevated (Freedberg, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of these reforms continues in the U.S. Preliminary results of the assessments are inconclusive as the full implementation has just begun. There has been some resistance to the movement. The Common Core is already a major topic of discussion by the 2016 presidential candidates, with some strongly opposing the movement as being “too intrusive” on the part of the federal government. Others embrace it as a means to elevate the aspirations of our future workforce. Some states have already withdrawn from the assessment consortia, opting to create their own versions of summative assessments. Many of the concerns of state leaders, parents, and teachers center on the timelines for implementation. To many this has felt like a “tsunami,” characterized by a series of waves, some more tumultuous than others, and resulting in many dramatic changes.

Parents have had to adapt to the new standards in many ways, often creating a steep learning curve. Many have supported the new initiatives, but others have shown their concerns, in particular, about the new assessments by “pulling out their children from the states’ standardized tests. Some states (e.g., Delaware) are now eliminating that option and are requiring that all students take the tests (Education Commission of the States, 2015).

Teachers and principals also have reservations about the use of the new assessments, with many finding concern about the use of their students’ test scores and results of the student learning outcomes (SLOs) as a major component (i.e., up to 50%) of their annual performance evaluations. Many of the SLOs lack technical integrity (i.e., validity and reliability) and are therefore questionable indicators of teacher competence. Other challenges include having a reasonable amount of time for the assessments, adequate instructional materials aligned with the Standards, and access to technology. The training of new educators who are skilled in the content, skills, and dispositions essential to implementing the standards, curriculum, and assessments will require time and resources. It will also require the will and commitment of those involved to work collaboratively with a vision that focuses on improved student learning as a collective goal for all. It will take several years to get a clearer picture of the overall impact of these important reforms, but hopefully will result in better instruction, improved performance, and college and career ready students.

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