Imagine being a new governor in a state that has adopted the Common Core State Standards. You weren't one of the ones who signed your name as a pledge to support the initiative a few years ago. You didn't help shepherd it through the tangle of interest groups in your state. But now, sitting down in the governor's chair, it's already a done deal. Your board or your education commissioner adopted the standards.

This is the scenario that has unfolded in more than half the states in the country, since the last round of gubernatorial elections produced new governors in 26 states that had adopted the common-core standards. And it's this situation that's a key area of focus now at the National Governors Association's education division.

You probably remember that the NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers were the ones that got dozens of governors and chiefs to sign onto the common-standards initiative back in 2009. Dane Linn was the guy who oversaw this for the NGA, but he's moved on to a new job at the College Board, and Richard Laine has taken over as director of the education division of the NGa's Center on Best Practices.

We wondered what Laine envisions as NGA's role and top-priority work at this juncture, as states begin to implement the standards, so we sat down to chat with him recently at the NGA's offices here in D.C.

Laine said that the NGA seeks to provide all governors, but particularly the new ones, with the support and information they need to think through the best ways to turn the common standards from guidelines on a page to real change in the classroom. Successful implementation will require "a much more integrated" approach to the facets of education policy than might have been routine in the past, he said. The NGA hopes to help governors find ways to use all the necessary levers—such as human capital, teacher and leader effectiveness, data, accountability and assessments—to bring about the necessary change, Laine said.

Without changes in those and other areas, Laine said, the common standards risk being "just aspirational." States must think about issues like teacher preparation and accountability in terms of the common standards, he said, but they also must work toward better vertical alignment of the levels of the education system with the common core in mind. How do the new guidelines speak to early education, K-12, higher education, and workforce development?

"It's a much more integrated agenda" than many governors have faced on the education landscape before, Laine said. "[The common core] cuts across all of these areas."

To address all the ways that the common standards might demand changes, a governor needs to build powerful coalitions that include K-12, higher education, business leaders, parents, state lawmakers, and others, Laine said. Such support networks are crucial if governors are to move the needle on policies that reshape teacher evaluation, assessment, or other things pivotal to the common core, Laine said.
Those coalitions will also "give them cover" politically during times when key audiences may doubt that their state is headed down the right path, such as when test scores dip as rigor rises, he said. Broad support is needed to "prevent a train wreck" that could happen if policies aren't aligned to support the common core in key areas, and the public doesn't see adequate reason to endure the difficult transition, Laine said.

"If we let this accident happen, there will be people out there who say, 'See? Public education can't do it,'" he said.

How will the NGA do this work? One way is through the "policy academies" it conducts with states on focus issues, Laine said. The organization chooses a topic, such as teacher evaluation or postsecondary education, and issues a request for proposals from states that wish to participate. The NGA chooses three to six states to work with on that topic for 12 to 18 months. In sessions, teams from each participating state analyze where the states are on that issue and what needs work. Teams might include a governor's education adviser and representatives from teachers' unions, higher education, K-12, or other areas depending on the issue at hand. That arrangement not only brings the pertinent expertise into the room, but assembles the leaders who would be pivotal in implementing the change that's decided on, Mr. Laine said.

The NGA also holds "learning labs," sessions designed to share the work of the policy academies with states that didn't participate. It also disseminates the work through webinars and issue briefs. The organization has long offered training for governors' education advisers, but is expanding that training this year, since there are so many new advisers who must help their bosses get acquainted with the common standards and craft strategies that cut across many areas touched by them.

The work Laine described to me was aimed at supporting governors who wanted to support the common standards. But what about those that don't? So I asked him: How are you handling the fires (or embers, as the case may be) of opposition among governors?

While he's very well aware of common-core skepticism in places like South Carolina, Laine said that he doesn't detect much opposition in governors' offices elsewhere.

"My sense is that it's the outlier governor saying, 'We don't want to play,'" Laine said.

The NGA is keeping tabs not only on the support governors need to move the common core along, but the impact that the 2014 elections will have on the standards and the assessments. The 2014-15 year is when the common assessments designed for the standards are scheduled to be operational. In the fall of that year, Laine said, 31 governors will be up for election. Whoever is in office when the election dust clears and the spring 2015 test results come out will be faced with explaining them to a broad array of stakeholders.