Toward Common Standards and Assessments for U.S. Schools:
Tackling the Tough Long-term Questions

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Note to readers: This plan keeps evolving as we gather more good advice. You’d be wise to view it as a working draft. It is almost sure to change.

Overview The Thomas B. Fordham Institute plans to organize and execute a project, tentatively dubbed “Building on a Solid Foundation,” that addresses some of the key structural and governance questions posed by the Common Core effort (and related standards and assessments) over the long term.

The present effort to draft common standards, although painstakingly designed, carefully implemented and highly participatory, is organized in an ad hoc way that does not yet have the architecture to sustain itself over time. Who will “own” these standards? Update them? Take responsibility for developing and operating an aligned assessment system over the long haul? Intersect these with NAEP, with NCLB, etc? Who, for example, will be responsible in 2020 for updating these standards? Administering the assessments? Scoring them? Paying for them? Solving problems that arise in connection with them? Some organizational invention may be called for (not unlike the creation of NAGB in 1988).

Our objective is to enliven and enlighten the national conversation about the organizational innovations and structural arrangements that may be necessary for U.S. education policies and practices in the 21st Century to make the most of results-based, standards-driven reform. We intend to develop a set of sound, practical recommendations, based on careful analysis, relevant experience, expertise and wisdom, in time for serious consideration by all relevant players by the beginning of 2011.

Step One: Commission and Publish Background Papers (approximately January – May 2010)

We intend to recruit some of the wisest thinkers in education policy and, via short papers that we commission them to write, stimulate thoughtful consideration of how to structure the long-term governance arrangements for the Common Core effort. We envision publishing up to five such “white papers.” Topics may include:

1. **Major governance options.** This paper will set the broad context, provide the relevant history of related efforts, and ponder the pros and cons of various arrangements, especially for education federalism, the federal government’s role, and means by which the standards-and-assessment process can be kept independent.

2. **Prior common standards/testing development efforts.** This paper will trace what was learned via the efforts of other organizations and states that have already developed common standards
and tests in collaborative partnerships. For example, what lessons might we learn from Achieve’s American Diploma Project? What can be learned from the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP)—a multi-state standards and testing effort involving Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire?

3. **Lessons from overseas.** This paper will detail how other federalist countries handle the governance of their national standards and testing regimes.

4. **Pros and cons of the NAGB model.** We’d likely recruit a former member or chair of the National Assessment Governing Board to provide his/her insights about what has worked—and hasn’t—when it comes to overseeing the Nation’s Report Card and what lessons may be drawn from that regarding the governance of “Common Core.” (The author might also reflect on the intersection of Common Core and NAEP. For example, many ask “why not turn the whole thing over to NAGB to run?”)

5. **The governance of state testing programs.** How are state assessment programs currently overseen? Is there such a thing as best practices? Which governing bodies make which decisions? Are there lessons that might be applied to a national level? What can we learn from former state directors of assessment?

6. **The testing industry.** Similarly, how will common standards and tests affect the textbook and testing industries? This paper will “map” these industries: the players, the market, the money, and how all of that might change with the introduction of common assessments. What do they have to gain and lose from a new common system? What can we learn from organizations (e.g. the Assessment Solutions Group) that help states carry out more cost-effective assessment practices?

These papers would be commissioned in January with drafts due in April, final drafts in May, for publication by early June.

**Step Two: Develop and Publish a Synthesis of Smart Thinking on These Questions**

Sometimes the best way to arrive at new insights and ideas is to solicit input from a variety of thoughtful, informed people with different (but not outlandish) perspectives, put it together, and see what themes emerge. Fordham has used that strategy twice in recent years. In 2006, we published *To Dream the Impossible Dream: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests for America’s Schools.* This report synthesized input from twelve experts on the U.S. might develop common standards and tests—and turn it into four distinct options. (One of those—“Let’s All Hold Hands”—closely resembles the approach now being followed by the Common Core effort.)

We used a similar approach last year in addressing how to hold voucher-receiving schools “accountable” without ruining them. (That report, *When Private Schools Take Public Dollars: What’s the Place of Accountability in School Voucher Programs?*, like *To Dream*, is available on the Fordham website.)
The process is straightforward. We develop a set of challenging questions and identify a group of top-notch experts and other influentials to address those questions. (Ideally, these are big-thinker types, not people pushing a narrow agenda or seeking their own ends. Of course they need to represent diverse perspectives.) We give them a month or so to answer our questions, gather their responses, and look for patterns. Ideally, we present their views in a compelling manner that helps to clarify (rather than further complicate) the issue, including major pros and cons of different approaches.

Among the questions we might pose to them:

- What sort of governance body should oversee the ongoing development and revision of the Common Core standards and related assessments? Should it be an existing body (like NAGB or ECS or CCSSO/NGA) or something new? What should it look like? Why?

- How can this governance body—and the actual management of standards and assessments—be organized, staffed, and financed so as to make it viable and stable yet with sufficient independence from the federal government?

- What should be the key functions of this governing body? These might include updates to the Common Core standards; the adoption of standards in additional subjects; and the development of specifications for related assessments. Should it also be charged with implementing the assessments? Administering the tests? Ensuring test security? Publishing the results? Setting “cut scores”? Rating schools based on the results? What’s the purview of this governing body, and what should be left to states and districts? What role should the federal government play?

- How does this governance body and management structure relate to (inter alia) NAEP, NAGB, CCSSO, NGA and other key players in the current standards-and-testing world (e.g. Achieve, College Board, etc.)?

Our plan would be to select panelists by May, pose our questions (and present the background papers—see above) during June, and receive panel members’ input by end of July. We’d publish the paper by September/October.

**Step Three: Create a Commission, Task Force or Working Group to Study the Issue and Make Recommendations**

The final step would be to organize a panel to ponder Common Core governance and related matters, akin to the Alexander-James entity of two decades ago. It would hold some hearings, receive expert testimony, give the public a chance to weigh in, chew over possibilities, and make recommendations. One of the group’s mandates should be to ensure that there’s a durable firewall between the federal government and the content of the Common Core standards and assessments, including key decisions that may lie ahead, such as what other subjects to include and where (and whether and how) to set “proficiency” cut-scores.
For this panel to be credible—and for its recommendations to be taken seriously and potentially adopted—we will need to select its members very carefully. We’d need a mixture of former governors and ex-members of Congress who are savvy about education, respected by their peers, and trusted by their respective political parties. We’d also need highly-knowledgeable individuals with a variety of experience in the education sphere: former district and state superintendents, higher education officials, board members, scholars, legislators, etc.

The panel would be announced soon after the 2010 election and would hold three meetings—probably December, January, February—in order to publish its recommendations by March 2011.

In Conclusion

The Common Core effort is off to a strong start; just a few years ago, no one would have predicted that America would be this close to achieving national standards and tests at this point in time. Yet many challenges and tough decisions lie ahead. Putting a credible, transparent, viable governance arrangement in place to manage the next phase of the effort will be crucial to its success—and its long term value to the nation.