

Leadership and Policy Strategies For “Top Ten” Performance

By Douglas B. Reeves, Ph.D.
The Leadership and Learning Center

1.0 **Executive Summary:** This report summarizes differences in leadership and policy strategies between the top and bottom-performing states as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. The principal findings are:

- **Quality of Standards:** The Top Ten state standards were more specific and content-oriented than the Bottom Ten. The switch to the Common Core Standards means that the standards themselves will no longer be a differentiator among states. The lesson on this report is this: States that implement standards with clarity and specificity have a clear advantage over those that merely adopt the documents but have no such deep implementation.
 - **Writing:** All of the Top Ten states have annual state-required writing exams. Although many Bottom Ten states also have writing exams, an important difference is that many of the Top Ten states (MA, VA, VT, ME, CT, MN, and WI), rather than merely administering a writing assessment, require students to incorporate writing into other subjects, including science, social studies, and mathematics.
- **Early Childhood Education:** Nine out of the Top Ten States have in common mandatory kindergarten and extensive Pre-K publicly provided education. Seven out of the Bottom Ten states have state-funded Pre-K programs, although not all of them meet the criteria for quality in standards, curriculum, and support services set by the Institute for Early Education Research.²
- **Governance Structure:** Top Ten States have appointed chief state school officers, while the Bottom Ten states are more likely to have elective chief school officers.³
- **Policy and Leadership:** There are specific policy and leadership strategies that states can employ to maximize the value of scarce resources of money, classroom

time, and leadership attention. The final section of this report suggests five specific actions for states to implement the Common Core with effectiveness and impact.

- 2.0 **Introduction and Rationale:** The purpose of this report is to examine the similarities and differences in leadership and policy strategies between the Top Ten states and Bottom Ten states, as determined by educational assessment data. In order to determine the Top Ten states, we relied on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a widely accepted independent and consistently applied measurement of student achievement. We did not use state proficiency data from local or state tests, because the evidence suggests individual states have had an incentive to lower the standard for proficiency over the last decade in response to federal incentives that were based upon state determinations of student success. As a result, there were states with low performance on the NAEP and high performance on local and state assessments. The primary disadvantage of using NAEP is that it focuses largely on literacy and math standards that are common to all states. One could argue that NAEP is not linked explicitly to the state curriculum; therefore, a portion of performance on the NAEP exam is not associated with the characteristics of the state or local schools. For the purpose of this analysis, we accept this limitation and believe that the advantages of using NAEP outweigh the disadvantages.
- 3.0 **Performance Differences:** In the United States, the Top Ten states in education—Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maine, Minnesota, Virginia, Montana, Wisconsin, and New York—are known for consistently having exemplary assessment scores for math, writing, and reading: For example, the Top Ten states had an average score of 246 on the 2009 4th grade NAEP math and 227 on the 2009 4th grade NAEP reading assessments, compared to the Bottom Ten’s average of 232 on the 2009 4th grade NAEP math and 213 on the 2009 4th grade NAEP reading assessments.⁴ (For more detail, please see Appendix A).
- 4.0 **Geographic Differences:** The top five are all located in the Northeast (Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Maine). The bottom five are located in the South.

- 5.0 **Spending Differences:** The Top Ten states have an average per-pupil spending in education of **\$12,948.40**, compared to **\$10, 058.10** per pupil spending in education for the Bottom Ten.⁵ There are also demographic differences: The Top Ten states have an average of five percent of students in limited English proficiency programs compared to eight percent for the Bottom Ten.⁶
- 6.0 **Governance Differences:** VT, MA, CT, NJ, ME, VA, MT, and NY operate on a state governance model where the **governor or a legislature (NY) appoints** the state board. (In MN, there is no state board, but the governor appoints the chief state school officer. WI has no state board.) VT, MA, CT, NJ, ME, VA, MT, and NY operate on a state governance model where the **governor or the state board appoints/selects** the chief state school officer (**neither the state board nor the chief state school officer are elected**). In contrast, the governance structure of the Bottom Ten suggests the election of school board members and officers by partisan ballot.
- 7.0 **Common Core Standards and Assessments:** All Top Ten states EXCEPT MN and VA have adopted the Common Core Standards. The Montana State Superintendent will make a recommendation in May 2011 to the Board of Public Education concerning the potential adoption of the Common Core State Standards in the state of Montana. All Top Ten states in education administer state-wide writing assessments, including in some cases multi-disciplinary writing assessments in social studies, science, math, and English/Language Arts. Nine out of ten of the Bottom Ten states administer state-wide writing assessments.
- 8.0 **Individual State Standards:** The shift to Common Core Standards will potentially work to the advantage of the Current Top Ten states. According to one independent analysis of academic standards, most of the Top Ten states have state English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics standards that are **clearly inferior**⁷ when compared to the Common Core Standards.
- The Exception is Massachusetts; where State ELA and Mathematics standards are **too close to call** when compared to the Common Core Standards.
 - Virginia's ELA standards are also **too close to call** when compared to the Common Core Standards.

All Bottom Ten states have state English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics standards that are either **clearly inferior** or **too close to call** when compared to the Common Core Standards.

- The major exception is California’s ELA standards, which are **clearly superior** when compared to the Common Core Standards. California’s mathematic standards are **too close to call**.

There is a big difference in the quality of the educational standards within the Top Ten educated states.

- The Top Ten states’ **English Language Arts (ELA)** standards varied in the grades and ranks of their ELA standards: ⁸

Top Ten States	Grade	Content & Rigor Score (Graded from 1 to 7)	Clarity and Specificity Score (Graded from 1 to 3)
Vermont	D	2	1
Massachusetts	A-	7	2
Connecticut	D	2	1
New Jersey	C	4	2
Maine	C	4	2
Minnesota	C	4	2
Virginia	B+	6	2
Montana	F	2	0
Wisconsin	D	3	1
New York	C	4	2

Detailed English Language Arts Grades; Jurisdiction in Rank Order

- The Top Ten states' **Mathematics** standards varied in the grades and ranks of their Mathematics standards: ⁹

Top Ten States	Grade	Content & Rigor Score (Graded from 1 to 7)	Clarity and Specificity Score (Graded from 1 to 3)
Vermont	F	1	1
Massachusetts	B+	6	2
Connecticut	D	3	1
New Jersey	C	4	1
Maine	C	3	2
Minnesota	B	5	2
Virginia	C	4	2
Montana	F	0	1
Wisconsin	F	1	1
New York	B	5	2

Detailed Mathematics Grades; Jurisdiction in Rank Order

There is also a big difference in the quality of educational standards within the Bottom Ten educated states.

- The grades and ranks of the Bottom Ten states' ELA standards varied widely:¹⁰

Bottom Ten States	Grade	Content & Rigor Score (Graded from 1 to 7)	Clarity and Specificity Score (Graded from 1 to 3)
Georgia	B+	6	2
Hawaii	C	4	1
New Mexico	C	4	1
Louisiana	B+	6	2
Alabama	B	6	1
Alaska	F	1	1
California	A	7	3
Mississippi	D	3	1
Nevada	C	4	1
Arizona	B	5	2

Detailed English Language Arts Grades; Jurisdiction in Rank Order

- The grades and ranks of the bottom ten states’ Mathematics standards were also very different from one another: ¹¹

Bottom Ten States	Grade	Content & Rigor Score (Graded from 1 to 7)	Clarity and Specificity Score (Graded from 1 to 3)
Georgia	A-	6	3
Hawaii	C	3	3
New Mexico	C	4	1
Louisiana	C	3	2
Alabama	B+	5	3
Alaska	D	3	1
California	A	7	3
Mississippi	C	4	2
Nevada	C	4	2
Arizona	B	4	3

Detailed Mathematics Grades; Jurisdiction in Rank Order

9.0 Leadership and Policy Implications:

Although each state has unique characteristics that influence educational policy and governance, there are five clear lessons from the Top Ten states for educational leaders:

- 1) **Allocate Financial Cuts Judiciously:** Although reductions in education budgets may be necessary in most states, one of the clearest advantages of the Top Ten states over their counterparts is their willingness to invest in education – almost 30% more per pupil in the Top Ten compared to the Bottom Ten. Indeed, data from the Alliance for Excellent Education suggests that when states direct their investments in education in ways that are related to reduced drop-out rates, the results include reduced costs for Medicaid and

incarceration, and increased tax revenues related to the higher employment rates of students with high school and post-secondary education.

- 2) **Maintain an Emphasis on Student Writing:** Reductions in state budgets need not result in reductions in academic rigor at the school and district level. For example, although some states have discontinued the use of state-paid writing assessments as a cost savings device, this does not necessarily imply that states should reduce their requirements for writing at the classroom level. One of the most important changes implied by the Common Core State Standards is a dramatic increase in “informational” writing in every grader, Kindergarten through 12. Even where state writing assessments have stopped, state education leaders and state department employees providing assistance to school systems should continue to insist on high levels of student writing and should facilitate local and regional professional learning opportunities so that teachers and administrators have the opportunities to score student writing on a collaborative basis.
- 3) **Depoliticize Educational Policy:** The data suggest that educational leadership that is stable and aligned with broad state policies yields better student results than leadership that is fragmented and political.
- 4) **Implement the Common Core State Standards With Rigor, Clarity, and Specificity:** An important lesson from the Top Ten is that the words of the standards themselves may have been less important than the rigor and comprehensiveness of the assessments that supported those standards. With almost all states adopting the Common Core, then the standards documents themselves will no longer distinguish one state from another. Rather, the key to real expectations of students – and the performance that results from those expectations - will be in the assessments at the state, district, and classroom levels. Accordingly, states should insist that school districts not wait for guidance from Washington or new information from assessment consortia, but begin immediately to undertake specific plans for implementation of the Common Core. Specifically, states can help school systems to identify the common element of current standards (the ones that states will assess in the spring of 2011) and the Common Core Standards. These common elements should influence teaching, learning, and assessment at the local level immediately. Second, states can help schools and districts develop model writing assessments in English/Language Arts, Science, and Math, capturing the best practices of individual schools and districts for state-wide distribution.
- 5) **Help Local Schools and Districts Monitor Implementation of Instructional Strategies:** One of the most cost-effective ways for states to support effective education at the local level is to combine monitoring of student results – a tool already in use in every state – with more effective monitoring of instructional and leadership strategies. This provides a maximum yield for a minimum investment. For example, states do not need to fund a state writing assessment in order to monitor the degree to which schools

and districts engage in effective writing instruction. States do not need to fund instructional coaches in order to monitor the degree to which schools and districts are using coaches effectively. In deciding where to allocate resources and where to make necessary cuts, state governments should ask, “Do we have the capacity to monitor the implementation and impact of this strategy?” If the answer is in the affirmative, then the investment may be justified. But if the answer is in the negative, then state policymakers and leaders will never know if their investments are related to improved student achievement.

10. For Further Information: This report was compiled independently by The Leadership and Learning Center and is subject to revision and correction. For further information, please contact Douglas Reeves at Dreeves@LeadandLearn.com, or (781) 710 9633.

Notes

1. Cavanaugh, S. (January 11, 2011). Educators regroup in recession's aftermath. *Education Week*. 30(16), pp. 6, 8-10. Accessed at <http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/01/11/12020-educators-regroup-in-recessions-aftermath>.
2. National Institute for Early Education Research (2009). *The State of Preschool 2009*. p. 6. Accessed at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>.
3. National Association of State Boards of Education (November 2010). *State Education Governance: State-by-State Chart of Essential Governance Information*. Accessed at <http://www.nasbe.org/index.php/downloads/nasbe-general/534-governance-state-by-state-nov2010>.
4. U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (2011). *NAEP State Profiles*. Accessed at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Carmichale, S. B., Martino, G., Porter-Magee, K. & Wilson, W. S. (July 10, 2010). *The State of State Standards--and the Common Core--in 2010*. pp. 7-8. Accessed at http://www.ctmirror.org/sites/default/files/documents/SOSSandCC2010_FullReportUpdated.pdf.
8. Ibid. pp. 366-367.
9. Ibid. pp. 367-368.
10. Ibid. pp. 366-367.
11. Ibid. pp. 367-368.