

business voice

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THE BUSINESS CASE FOR COMMON CORE



Nevada Ready for Common Core



BY ELAINE WYNN, PRESIDENT, STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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emember Marty McFly, Michael J. Fox's character in *Back to the Future*? Sometimes, my experience with academic standards feels like Marty's – it seems a little difficult to get back to the future.

First, a little history – In 1996, Governor Miller invited me to join him at a special convening of the National Governor's Association – a summit on education, at IBM's headquarters in New York. Every Governor brought one business representative. One conclusion crystallized that day: our nation's Governors and every businessperson in the room believed that we needed a concentrated and coordinated effort to create standards that could be common across all states. We resolved to ensure children in Las Vegas learned the same things as youngsters in Los Angeles, Lubbock, Lansing and Lexington. We returned to our respective states inspired and motivated yet unsure as to how to get it done.

Fast forward to 1997. As a member of Nevada's newly-created Council for Establishment of Academic Standards, our charge was to define what Nevada's children needed to learn at every grade level to succeed in the 21st century. It was laborious and important work. Frankly, it was daunting. How could we know our standards were relevant for a global marketplace, while working only in Nevada?

It was, for me, a relief when the federal government stepped up to coordinate, compile and compel the important work being done by states. Their push for innovation encouraged states to aim high – to define standards common across all states *and* calibrated to standards of nations around the globe.

Our nation's Governors were the impetus for Common Core. From my rightside seat, their effort demonstrates

the best of States' rights in action. It is anything but a federal conspiracy, as a few persistently argue. Folks, it's time to move on, follow Marty and get back to the future. There's real work to be done!

The new standards set a high bar of expectation. They emphasize process, not just content. They move us from rote learning to developing capabilities in children. They ask students to think, apply knowledge, infer, develop strength in analyzing technical text and defend opinions with supporting evidence. Yes, they are rigorous. Yes, they are challenging. And, yes, they will equip youngsters with skills and experience to think critically, communicate effectively and accomplish real-world achievements – which certainly appeals to me as a businessperson.

In my role as national board chair of Communities in Schools (CIS), I was particularly sensitive to the implications of Common Core for at-risk children. We lose too many poor and minority children already. Would raising the bar mean losing more? After exhaustive evaluation, CIS believes that at-risk youngsters can and will meet higher expectations, as long as adults find ways to scale the integrated and focused supports they will need to clear the bar. (The recent results we saw in CCSD's ZOOM Schools make the point. Although preliminary, the gains were impressive and show us what is possible.)

Look, I am a realist. Any major change creates short-term pain. Re-defining expectations in K-12 education is a sea change for our state and nation. There will be confusion, turbulence and fear. There always is.

I am also an optimist. The long term gain is worth it. The possibility of what we can become keeps me going. So, let's get back to the future, keep moving forward and make **Nevada Ready!**

The Business Case for Common Core

BY THE LAS VEGAS METRO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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teering students towards success after graduation benefits everyone. Employers are able to depend on a well-educated workforce to maintain and grow their businesses, universities spend less money on remedial education and individuals are smarter, more capable, more employable and will likely earn more. As job creators, employers and business leaders, we need to make sure that the students in today's classrooms are prepared as tomorrow's skilled workforce.

Employers today are looking to the next generation of their workers, colleagues, suppliers and leaders. And those future workers are getting primed in the classrooms today. Ensuring that Nevada's workforce is adequately prepared – for college, career and life beyond high school – is paramount to ensuring that Nevada has the workforce it needs to be competitive in the global economy. The steps the business community take now towards economic diversification, industry development and startup innovation can only be sustained in the long term if the next generation of employees are prepared to enter the workforce.

It all starts with academic standards in the classroom. That is why a set of standards known nationally as Common Core, and in Nevada called the Nevada Academic Content Standards, has been implemented to create a more rigorous academic experience in our public schools. Defined as a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts, Common Core Standards outline a series of clear, consistent guidelines for what a student should know and be able to execute in respective subjects at the end of each grade year. Its overall objectives are to ensure that U.S. high school students graduate with the knowledge and skill set necessary to succeed in college and career, create consistent learning goals across the

U.S., and maintain and advance the nation's place as a leader of innovation and growth in the competitive global economy. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core Standards. "Nevada is raising its academic standards to help our students receive a world-class education and ensure all Nevadans are ready for success in the 21st Century," says Dale Erquiaga, Superintendent of Public Instruction for Nevada. "Since 2011, our schools have been implementing new Nevada Academic Content Standards, which are the Nevada version of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics." The science standards were adopted by the State Board of Education in February of 2014, and will soon be taught across the state.

Common Core Standards change what a student is expected to know at various stages of their academic advancement and also influences the methods that are used to teach subject material. It aims to set a realistic baseline for student achievement and give teachers and parents more opportunities to recognize areas of improvement before they become major gaps that could seriously hinder a student's progress. School districts continue to have power over determining their own curriculum. "Districts continue to develop their own curricula, and classroom teachers will tailor instruction to the new standards and the needs of their students," Erquiaga says.

State Senator Joyce Woodhouse (D), chairwoman of the Nevada Senate Committee on Education and a former program administrator for the Clark County School District with a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and educational administration, believes that the content standards represent a major improvement. "I believe the Nevada Academic Content Standards are more rigorous than our previous standards and are



designed to prepare students for college and careers,” Woodhouse says. “Students, through classroom instruction and experiences provided by their highly qualified teachers, will understand the content and processes involved in their English language arts and mathematics curricula.”

“A lot has changed since we were kids,” says President of the State Board of Education and well-known education advocate and philanthropist Elaine Wynn. “To succeed in today’s world, our children require skills and experience to think critically, communicate effectively and accomplish real-world achievements.” She believes that the new standards will help students achieve those goals and give them increased opportunities by improving the quality of education they receive.

“Our more rigorous Academic Content Standards (based on Common Core) are raising the bar for what kids will learn and know at every grade level. We have been at it for a while. The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Education, which I co-chaired with [Nevada System of Higher Education] Chancellor Dan Klaich almost five

years ago, developed a blueprint for education reform that included a recommendation to adopt the Common Core State Standards,” Wynn says.

The campaign to educate students, peers, and community stakeholders about the new standards and their implementation is known as Nevada Ready! Wynn believes that the Common Core standards are the best way to equip students properly and prepare them to be a part of a highly educated workforce.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, by 2020, 62% of state jobs will require a degree beyond high school (including in growing occupations such as managerial/professional, sales/office, social sciences, and health care), and Nevada is expected to fall short by 7 percentage points.

Erquiaga agrees with Wynn’s assessment. “New academic standards, along with high quality and well-supported educators, have the potential to transform outcomes for Nevada students and for our state,” he says. “Nevada’s new standards are expected to drastically reduce the need for remedial classes. The standards will also strengthen the state’s workforce and economy as more students graduate from high school ready to succeed in a new economy.”

They are not alone in their support of the new standards. A 2010 review of state-based standards done by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education-focused

think tank, found that the Common Core Standards were “clearly superior” to standards found in Nevada, which received a “C” grade along with 32 other states for math and reading. Common Core Standards were found to be clearer and more rigorous than the pre-existing standards.

Las Vegas is a community well-known for its growing population, and many of the students who are now enrolled in Clark County schools did not begin their education locally. Common Core Standards are especially important in areas of the country (like Southern Nevada) that are more prone to transiency and transplanted residents, as it regiments the type of materials students are expected to know and when they are expected to know it across districts, counties and even states. A high school junior who moves from New Mexico will not have to repeat American History because of discordant state standards; he or she will be taught similar material at similar times throughout their education.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which formally backed the adoption of Common Core Standards, notes on its website, BusinessForCore.com, that students in the United States are lagging behind other students in developed economies. U.S. students rank 17th in reading literacy, 21st in science, and 26th in math according to the site. The shortfall extends beyond the national scope into the local, as the U.S. Chamber also predicts that by 2020, 62 percent of jobs in Nevada will require some postsecondary education credential, but only 28 percent of adults in the state currently have a postsecondary credential. This leaves a critical gap in workforce needs and poses a real threat to our economy. The higher guidelines Common Core Standards bring to public schools will help close the skills gap that will make a substantial difference in the United States’ place in the global economy.

Some of the most vocal criticism of the standards come from individuals who oppose a standardization of subject matter across the states, but advocates are quick to point out that adoption of Common Core Standards is voluntary, even arguing that because the standards are focused, it allows even greater innovation at local levels to teach complex ideas and topics to students.

Common Core Standards are the brainchild of individual state governors who sought to tackle declining test

scores relative to other industrialized nations. In an Op-Ed piece published in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in July 2014, Gary Standafer, a former classroom teacher who has worked in textbook publishing and test development, notes that the standards weren’t designed by bureaucrats. He points out that the standards were authored “by scholars who represent the best base of knowledge

of how students learn and what they need to know in order to be prepared for college and careers.” Standafer writes that the standards “are research-based and represent what is known about learning progressions and how students’ mathematical knowledge and skills develop over time,” citing that the standards for science and English language arts are likewise rooted in educational research.

Brian McAnallen, vice president of government affairs at the Las Vegas Metro Chamber of Commerce, believes the academic standards are pivotal to improving the education and workforce in Southern Nevada and closing the skills gap. “The Metro Chamber fully supports the Common Core Standards,” he says. “They are a key component of the work we are doing to improve the schools in Southern Nevada and make our community a more attractive place to live and do business. We are working with state and local stakeholders to make sure they know the Metro Chamber supports the new standards.”

Erquiaga believes the backing of community organizations like the Metro Chamber is an important part of the new standards implementation and success. “It is critical that educators have the support of their communities to implement these new standards successfully. Nevada Ready! aims to build public awareness and engagement regarding key issues impacting Nevada education,” he explains. “As business and civic leaders, your support is critical if our local schools are to reach even greater heights than before.”

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 84% of math and/or English language arts teachers in Nevada believe the standards will have a positive impact on students’ ability to think critically and use reasoning skills.

Learn More About Common Core and the Nevada Ready! Campaign by visiting nevadaready.gov on the web, [@NevadaReady](https://twitter.com/NevadaReady) on Twitter and on the Nevada Ready! Facebook page. You can also find out more information at BusinessForCore.com.



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