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COMMENTARY

Trimming the Cost of Common-Core Implementation

By Patrick J. Murphy and Elliot M. Regenstein

The Common Core State Standards are designed to have a transformative effect on teaching and learning in the United States. But, as we all know, the 46 states and the District of Columbia that have adopted the common core are just beginning the journey of implementation. A great deal of thoughtful work is required to implement the standards successfully, and that work will not come without a price tag.

As the adopting states develop and launch plans for the common core, they are almost universally shying away from honest discussions about how much those plans are going to cost. We believe that a frank conversation about the expense of this work is necessary, largely because state leaders who make smart choices can shepherd the process in a cost-effective manner.

As we argued in our recent **report**, "Putting a Price Tag on the Common Core: How Much Will Smart Implementation Cost?," the statewide cost of bringing the common core to classrooms could be reduced significantly if states were willing to rethink implementation. Our report focuses on three key areas of expense: new instructional materials, new assessments, and professional development. While we realize that even the most efficient approach is likely to lead to some new expenses, we believe that states can minimize the cost by taking advantage of emerging best practices and consciously repurposing existing state funding streams focused on these areas.

Our paper attempts to estimate the cost of transition during the initial implementation phase. We first estimated the expenses associated with a business-as-usual scenario, in which states simply spend more on traditional delivery methods—hard-copy textbooks, face-to-face professional development, and paper-based standardized tests. Such an approach would, according to our calculations, require an additional $12
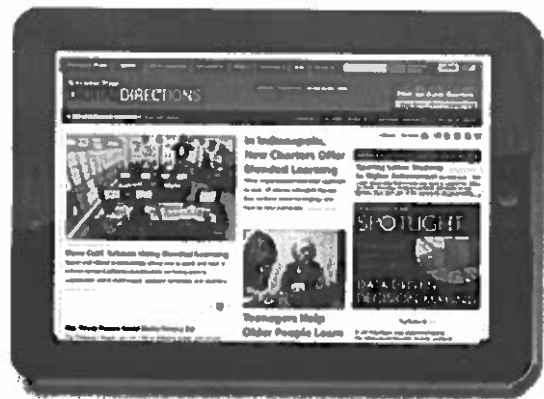
"State leaders who make smart choices can shepherd [standards] implementation in

billion in spending across the 46 states and the District of Columbia, or an average increase of $289 in per-student spending. Don't let sticker shock set in. This group of states already spends about $525 billion in federal, state, and local funds on education in a single year. The increase here would represent less than 3 percent of that figure.

a cost-effective manner."

But the common core will only cost that much to implement if states make no effort to reduce incremental costs of materials, assessments, and professional development. With some changes in approach—what we call "balanced implementation"—the total cost could drop to less than half the estimate: roughly $5.1 billion, or $121 per student. And if we consider the fact that some existing resources could be repurposed, the additional net cost for states could be even lower, likely less than $100 per student.

What does our balanced-implementation scenario look like? Our ideas include:

• **Moving away from hard-copy textbooks and doing more sharing of online materials.** New platforms are available for self-publishing textbooks, and opportunities have grown whereby educators can collaborate beyond their districts to develop great materials. We can already see examples of cross-state sharing of curriculum and materials, such as the tri-state materials-sharing platform utilized by Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island. Florida has begun to look for ways to move away from hard-copy textbooks. And advances in technology are easing the production and use of e-readers and electronic textbooks, as well as online-resource exchanges.

• **Using computer-administered technology to offer formative assessments.** The federally funded testing consortia, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, are in the process of creating new, universal assessment tools. States should take advantage of these resources, rather than try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to testing.

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• **Delivering professional development through a mix of in-person and online instruction.** Customized professional development should address the needs of individual teachers, including specific gaps in knowledge and areas needing growth. Online libraries of training videos are another resource that can provide teachers with access to relevant professional development. Charter managers, such as New Tech Network, have designed professional-development modules that serve more schools more effectively and facilitate higher -quality conversations among teachers who share similar content and instructional goals.

Leading states, districts, and charter providers have adopted these practices and are finding that they can maintain or increase instructional quality while lowering costs. West Virginia and Utah, for example, are using their top teachers to help develop professional-development units and making those available on a dedicated website. These states are not treating common-core implementation as something above and beyond their usual use of materials, assessments, and

professional-development practices. Instead, they are viewing the transition to the common core as an opportunity to adapt their practices in an effort to deliver 21st-century education.

• **States, districts, and charter providers must be willing to stop purchasing goods and services from their existing vendors if they don't meet their current needs, and seek out new vendors willing to take advantage of the opportunities the new standards present.** These practices could be cost-effective even if the new standards were not being implemented as widely, but the *commonness* of the common core has the potential to restructure these markets dramatically, thus opening up a host of new opportunities, including cross-state resource sharing. The conditions are ripe for locally developed curricular modules, lesson plans, formative assessments, and professional-development resources to have a national impact.

Some analyses have portrayed the common core as a restrictive policy change that will hamstring educational professionals. They miss the point. The commonality of the standards should be a blessing for individual classroom teachers, allowing them access to resources that meet their unique needs. The common standards, coupled with 21st-century technology, have the potential to create a new kind of community of districts, school leaders, and teachers—a community liberated to improve instruction in ways that were once thought to be impossible.

We are aware of critics who estimate a shocking price tag for implementation. During lean budgetary times, these dramatic figures can give some pause about moving forward with the core. While states *could* spend that much money on implementation, they don't have to. Tightened purse strings should force states to seek cost-effective solutions that make the best use of funds while leading to the use of high-quality instructional materials, assessments, and professional development. Implementing the common core won't be cheap, but the expense will be worth it if it leads to improved teaching and learning.

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