

## Providing Greater Opportunities for Deeper Learning in NCLB\* Waivers

### The Need for Deeper Learning

In recent years, a national consensus has emerged regarding educational expectations for all students. Rigorous standards for college and career readiness developed by state leaders have been adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia. State leaders have also formed two unique consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium—that are designing a new generation of assessments to support these standards. This shared agreement among so many states to educate all students to the same high levels of achievement represents a major shift in the nation’s attitude about the goals of public education.

Unfortunately, the nation’s education infrastructure is not currently designed to support this important shift in education goals. To accomplish this shift, policy and practice at the federal, state, and local levels need to support the acquisition of *deeper learning*, the knowledge and skills all students need to succeed in college, a career, and life.

Deeper learning competencies prepare students to

- know and master core academic content;
- think critically and solve complex problems;
- work collaboratively;
- communicate effectively; and
- be self directed and able to incorporate feedback.

The basic concepts of teaching for deeper learning are not new to education; indeed, they are routine educational practice for many accomplished teachers and educators as well as some high-performing schools, and they are predicated on the delivery of rigorous core content. These successful practices are now being confirmed by increasing bodies of evidence underscoring the necessity for deeper learning as an integral part of the education process.

Further, many policymakers have long been rightly concerned about the large numbers of low-income students and students of color who progress through the U.S. education system without being able to demonstrate that they have learned basic skills like reading or math computation. But

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\* No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

just as these students have not mastered basic skills, they have not mastered the skills embodied in deeper learning—the ability to know, think, and do.

The U.S. economy can only thrive if the whole population is equipped to succeed—not just fewer than half, as statistics show—which requires that equity in educational access and opportunities become a reality for all students. Therefore, making deeper learning opportunities more equitable is imperative from both moral and economic perspectives. Not only does this require the adoption of college- and career-ready standards with accountability systems and assessments tied to these standards, it also requires that all teachers have the skills needed to create opportunities for deeper learning in their classrooms for all of their students.

## **Deeper Learning in NCLB Waiver Applications**

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is currently granting waivers to states that provide greater flexibility around specific requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve education outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. ED has granted waivers to eleven states and is currently reviewing waiver applications from an additional twenty-six states and the District of Columbia.

To what extent are states aligning standards, professional development, and teacher evaluations with deeper learning? One of the requirements of the waiver application is state adoption of college- and career-ready standards, and several states define college- and career-ready standards in a way that encourages deeper learning. With these standards serving as an anchor, accountability systems should also provide the opportunity to advance deeper learning at the state level. In addition to implementing curriculum and assessments aligned with these standards, successful implementation of college- and career-ready standards requires alignment with professional development and teacher evaluation systems. A review of the approved and pending waiver applications indicates that there are variations in the degree to which deeper learning competencies are reflected in the standards, accountability systems, professional development, and teacher evaluations proposed by states.

The following synopsis of six approved waiver applications demonstrates the diversity of ways in which deeper learning is reflected in state waiver applications as they relate to professional development and teacher evaluations. State waiver applications were selected based on approval status and in an effort to ensure that the applications selected varied by geographic location and the inclusion of states that received Race to the Top grant funding as well as states that have not been awarded this additional funding. One of the purposes of the following state waiver review is to provide a synopsis of information states provided in their application in these areas. It is important to note that lack of evidence in the waiver application does not necessarily reflect that deeper learning practices are not occurring. For example, the level of detail requested by ED regarding professional development and evaluation does not require certain details. However, waiver applications can serve as a starting point for encouraging states to evaluate how, and to what extent, they are supporting deeper learning as they implement the policies and practices outlined in their applications.



## **Delaware**

According to Delaware’s application, the state plans to prepare all students for success in the global economy by teaching them to use critical thinking skills, higher-order thinking skills, and more complex real-world skills. This definition reflects several of the deeper learning competencies.

Delaware plans to implement a statewide “data coach” system that affords all teachers a minimum of ninety minutes of collaborative planning time each week to focus on instructional alignment of the written and taught curriculum, data analysis, skill building, and strategic planning for differentiated instruction. In addition, schools and local education agencies would provide professional development aligned to individual teacher needs. These individual needs are identified through “learning walks,” in which administrators conduct walkthroughs of each classroom and provide feedback to teachers. Delaware’s “observation rubrics” focus on “planning and preparation” (e.g., Does the teacher demonstrate solid understanding of content and its prerequisite relationships and connections with other disciplines?), “classroom environment, instruction” (e.g., Does the teacher’s use of questioning and discussion techniques reflect high-level questions, true discussion, and full participation by all students?), and “professional responsibilities.”

Deeper learning competencies are not mentioned explicitly. However, they are reflected to a certain extent in Delaware’s plan for teacher professional development and evaluation.

## **Georgia**

According to “Georgia’s College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) and ESEA Flexibility,” “all students will graduate from high school with both rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge through higher-order skills including, but not limited to, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration.” This definition reflects four of the five deeper learning competencies. Georgia’s plan for professional development includes formative assessment lessons and strategies that focus on a student’s ability to think critically, problem solve, and collaborate, all of which are deeper learning competencies.

Georgia’s application states that professional development should reinforce an educator’s understanding and use of strategies for

- promoting equity and high expectations for all students;
- applying research-based teaching strategies and assessment processes;
- involving families and other stakeholders in promoting student learning; and
- ensuring deep understanding of subject matter and instructional strategies.

Georgia would use the Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS) to measure teacher proficiency in professional knowledge, instructional planning, instructional strategies differentiated instruction, assessment strategies, assessment uses, positive learning environment, academically challenging environment, professionalism, and communication. TAPS may include evidence of the teacher’s ability to facilitate students’ use of higher-level thinking skills in instruction.

Georgia’s plan for professional development and teacher evaluation reflects some of the competencies of deeper learning.



## **Maryland**

The state defines college and career readiness as “including mastery of rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge through higher-order skills to demonstrate success in college and a career.” This includes the ability to think critically and solve problems, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and be self directed in the learning process. More specifically, the application states that a student who is college and career ready should

- be prepared to succeed in credit-bearing postsecondary introductory general education courses or in an industry certification program without needing remediation;
- be competent in the state’s “Skills for Success,” which includes learning, thinking, communication, technology, and interpersonal skills;
- have identified potential career goal(s) and understand the steps to achieve them; and
- be skilled enough in communication to seek assistance as needed, including student financial assistance.

Maryland uses the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards as its standards for professional development. InTASC’s fifth standard, Innovative Applications of Content, requires that “the teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues.”<sup>1</sup>

There is greater evidence in the application of deeper learning in Maryland’s definition of college and career readiness than in their plan for professional development and teacher evaluation.

## **Massachusetts**

Massachusetts has adopted the common core state standards and added a set of pre-K standards in both mathematics and English language arts (ELA). Because of the state’s deep involvement in the standards’ development process and the strong alignment between old and new state frameworks, Massachusetts anticipates that the transition to a new curriculum will not be as complex as in other states. The transition to the new curriculum frameworks was also the featured theme of the state’s fourth annual Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Summit held in November 2011, which was attended by more than 800 educators. More than 170,000 print copies of the new frameworks were sent to individual teachers to use for their independent classroom alignment work.

According to Massachusetts’s waiver application, professional development would focus on supporting teachers as they align their course work with the state’s college- and career-ready standards in ELA and mathematics. Massachusetts’s educators would also participate in the PARCC Educator Cadres meetings, a series of regional meetings designed to allow educators to test the instructional tools and participate in professional development opportunities focused on the alignment of district curricula to the college- and career-ready standards.

Deeper learning competencies reflected in Massachusetts’s waiver application include the use of developed instructional models and embedded performance assessments based on new standards. Massachusetts proposes to review and align its professional standards for teacher licensure with the new standards and indicators for teacher evaluation, which are linked to the state’s curriculum frameworks. Deeper learning competencies are also reflected in the teacher evaluations, including



district-determined measures of student learning across grades and subjects, such as student portfolios, capstone projects, and performances.

Although not explicitly referred to as deeper learning, the deeper learning competencies are well reflected throughout Massachusetts's waiver application.

## **Oregon**

The "Oregon Diploma" identifies a set of essential skills that students must demonstrate in order to enter postsecondary education and the workforce.<sup>2</sup> The state would phase in proficiency requirements, learning progressions, and assessment strategies for the following essential skill sets, including the ability to

- demonstrate personal management and teamwork skills;
- think critically and analytically;
- listen actively and speak clearly and coherently;
- use technology to learn, live, and work;
- demonstrate civic and community engagement; and
- demonstrate global literacy.

Oregon has adopted teaching and administrator standards to improve student academic growth and achievement by improving professional development. A portion of Oregon's teacher evaluation system is performance based using multiple measures of assessments, which includes a student portfolio of evidence. Oregon would use student data to promote higher-level thinking skills and college- and career-ready behaviors.

Deeper learning is reflected in the essential skills and requirements; however, it is not reflected in Oregon's plan for professional development and teacher evaluation.

## **Washington**

The overarching goal of Washington's plan for implementing the common core state standards and high-quality assessments is to ensure that all high school graduates master rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge through high-order thinking skills, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and engage in life-long learning processes. Additionally, the skills and knowledge expected of all students would include communicating successfully in a variety of ways and settings and with a variety of audiences; thinking analytically, logically, and creatively; and integrating technology literacy and fluency as well as different experiences and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems.

Washington's application states that professional development must simultaneously support teachers to improve their skills and knowledge, the level of engagement and participation of their students in learning, and the rigor of the content being taught. Professional development should support teachers in implementing a multi-tiered instructional framework to support student mastery of the rigorous content knowledge and ability to apply this knowledge. Washington plans to use a four-level rating system to evaluate teachers, identifying performance along a continuum and would include mandatory observations. Washington's application includes a "teacher evaluation criteria,"



which is a rubric for the district’s instructional framework, and “teacher ratings.” Washington’s extensive detail regarding teacher observations indicates that this is a critical component of teacher evaluations, compared to some other states, which base their teacher evaluations predominantly on a single student test score.

Deeper learning competencies are evident in the state standards and, to a lesser extent, in the state’s plan for professional development and teacher evaluation.

## **Policy Recommendations**

In addition to implementing curriculum and student assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards, the implementation of these standards should require professional development and teacher evaluation systems be aligned with preparing students to meet those standards. Although deeper learning competencies were reflected in state plans for college- and career-ready standards, they were not reflected as well in state plans for teacher professional development and evaluation, both of which should be aligned to the standards and reflect deeper learning competencies.

There is an opportunity for states to incorporate more practices of deeper learning as the application process progresses and as states begin to implement their waiver plans. Specifically, states can (1) provide professional development that supports teachers in developing instructional practices that create opportunities for deeper learning and (2) develop teacher evaluation systems that measure how effectively teachers are creating these opportunities for deeper learning for their students. Policymakers should support the following recommendations:

- **Include the five competencies of deeper learning in the state definition of college and career readiness.** Most state waiver applications include a definition of college and career readiness that reflects or identifies only some of the deeper learning competencies. In order to ensure that students are provided with opportunities for deeper learning, deeper learning competencies should be reflected in the state standards. States should specifically identify each of the five competencies as a goal for their students. State adoption of standards for college and career readiness should include both rigorous academic content and the teaching of advanced skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and the application of content knowledge. Professional development and teacher assessments that are aligned to the state’s definition of college and career readiness should support and evaluate instructional practices designed to create opportunities for deeper learning in the classroom.
- **Provide professional development that focuses on instructional strategies for developing deeper learning competencies.** All teachers need to be capable of leading classrooms in which students have opportunities to engage in tasks and assignments that enable them to demonstrate the deep understanding of content and higher-level skills necessary for success after high school. Teachers need to develop these abilities *before* they start in the classroom and they must have opportunities to hone their skills continually throughout their careers. Resources for professional development should be directed toward efforts that are effective in improving instruction and creating deeper learning opportunities for students. This includes professional development on how to use appropriate curricular instructional materials to facilitate deeper learning around college- and career-ready standards. States should provide professional development that focuses on the instructional skills needed for deeper learning to occur.





Specifically, professional development should help teachers develop and implement a multi-tiered instructional framework designed to maximize deeper learning by

- supporting student mastery of rigorous content knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge;
- creating lessons that provide students with opportunities to utilize critical thinking skills and solve complex problems;
- creating opportunities for students to work collaboratively with their peers;
- providing students with a variety of means to communicate and demonstrate learning;
- creating a classroom environment where students can be self directed; and
- providing ongoing feedback to students.

It is important to note that deeper learning opportunities can look different in high schools; therefore, professional development at this level should also focus on (1) making students' work even more relevant to college and career readiness, (2) increasing teacher competency in specific content areas, (3) developing ways to support the connection between rigorous content and practical experience, and (4) project-based learning aligned with standards for college- and career-readiness.

In addition to focusing the content of the professional development on instructional strategies that create opportunities for deeper learning, the structure of that professional development must allow for this type of learning and collaboration to take place. Professional development opportunities should be structured in a manner that allows sufficient time for collaboration that is ongoing, job embedded, and fosters peer support and accountability as part of a shared culture of effective practice. Improving the levels of student attainment and reducing achievement gaps requires the creation of a shared conception of good teaching, establishing points of focus for training and support, aligning systems of assessing practice, and providing feedback to develop high-level teacher competencies.

Networks of teachers can be created in an effort to develop and share information on effective instructional practices. Some states and districts have created systems for state-to-local and district-to-school training using regional teams, experts, and/or mentors. States should also develop strategies for supporting the development of deeper learning instructional strategies grounded in rigorous standards of practice in teacher preparation programs, which includes clinical preparation and induction programs.

States should also encourage the adoption of schoolwide practices and reforms that support these efforts. States and districts can provide opportunities for school leaders to participate in professional development related to supporting deeper learning practices, specifically around observations, evaluations, and instructional support. Schools could also use federal, state, and local resources to expand or restructure the school day to provide additional time for teacher collaboration around deeper learning, as well as opportunities for students to participate in deeper learning through work based learning, or internship opportunities that reinforce mastery of college- and career-ready standards.



- **Create and implement teacher evaluation systems that measure instructional practices in support of deeper learning.** Deeper learning can be measured through teacher observations and assessment of student work and performance, such as portfolios, projects, or higher-order tests designed to measure these types of competencies. Instructional strategies should be aligned with and measured against established student-learning objectives. Therefore, state- and locally-developed teacher evaluation systems should include the use of teacher-performance indicators, such as observations of teaching practice and assessment of student work and performance. States and districts that use these measures often create detailed rubrics for these observations and assessments. These rubrics should include measures of teacher practice related to advancing deeper learning. Specifically, these rubrics should measure whether there is evidence that the teacher is
  - supporting student knowledge and mastery of core academic content;
  - providing activities that require students to think critically and solve complex problems;
  - providing opportunities for students to work collaboratively with their peers;
  - providing students with opportunities to communicate effectively using a variety of mediums;
  - encouraging students to be self directed; and
  - providing ongoing feedback to students that they can incorporate into their work.

## **Conclusion: Toward a Deeper Learning Experience for All**

The widescale adoption of standards for college and career readiness was a bold step that now requires an even greater commitment to successful implementation. To realize the promise of these standards fully, education leaders need to ensure that the rigorous mix of knowledge and skills called for by employers and higher education institutions is foremost in implementation. Successful implementation also requires that teachers be provided with professional development aligned with these standards and be evaluated based on their ability to teach to these standards. The above recommendations support the inclusion of deeper learning competencies into the standards and the instruction around the standards. These deeper learning competencies are essential elements to preparing students for success in college, a career, and civic life.

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***This brief was prepared by members of the advocacy and policy staff at the Alliance for Excellent Education.***

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Chief State School Officers, *Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards: A Resource for State Dialogue* (Washington, DC: Author, 2011), [http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2011/InTASC\\_Model\\_Core\\_Teaching\\_Standards\\_2011.pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2011/InTASC_Model_Core_Teaching_Standards_2011.pdf) (accessed April 4, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Oregon Department of Education, "The Oregon Diploma," <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=368> (accessed April 4, 2012).

