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Md. signs education standards initiative

It's among 46 states that will craft national proposals

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Maryland and 45 other states have agreed to develop a common set of academic standards for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, a national shift away from local control over schools that seemed unlikely even a few years ago.

The agreement signed by Gov. Martin O'Malley and state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick was led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. It would only commit Maryland and the other states to craft a common core vision for what every student should know in math and reading, but it is a step that is expected to eventually lead to the adoption of national standards and tests.

"It is a very big deal for the governors to propose this because they are the guardians of states' rights," said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy. Several of the last four presidents have proposed a more national approach to standards and testing in the country, but their efforts met with strong resistance because of the American tradition of allowing districts to decide curriculum for the children in their schools.

Some of the more conservative states, including Texas and South Carolina, did not sign the initiative.

Under the proposal, each state will have to decide whether to adopt the standards when they are brought out late this year. They are expected to be far more focused and slimmed down than states' current standards.

Grasmick said she has discussed the idea with the state school board and expects it to adopt the standards, as well as national tests that would save the state millions of dollars.

The movement to develop common standards has evolved. Just nine years ago, every school district in the state had its own curriculum and Maryland began setting state standards, by working to find common ground among all 24 school districts. Then No Child Left Behind act was passed, and each state had to decide what should be taught and tested, a process that Colleen Seremet, assistant superintendent for instruction in Maryland, said was "difficult work."

But as different states accomplished it, she said, educators began to see they had more agreement

than disagreement over what should be taught. Today, she said, Maryland and other states often compare notes.

Teachers unions and local superintendents now embrace the idea of common standards. "I look at it from a practical perspective," said Baltimore County Superintendent Joe A. Hairston. "It seems to me if a child moves from Maryland to Oklahoma, reading must still be one of the things they must learn."

The movement gained support recently when it was initiated by the states rather than the federal government. "This is a different kind of effort. It won't be a top-down initiative but a collective effort," said Linda Valli, a professor in the department of curriculum and instruction at the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Still, the idea of a national standard does not necessarily mean there will be agreement among the states. Jennings and Valli said they expect some fierce debate once the standards are made public late this year.

In July, the National Governors Association will release a document with general goals of what students need to achieve to be ready for college or the work force by the time they graduate.

States will be able to comment on those and then a review panel of experts in the field will have to validate them. Once they are validated, the standards for each grade from kindergarten to 12th grade will be written, probably by the end of the year.

If a national test was adopted, the state would do away with the Maryland School Assessments in grades three through eight, but probably not the Maryland High School Assessment, Grasmick said.

Grasmick said the move toward a more national approach would mean substantial savings for states if they adopted a national test. Currently, Maryland spends about \$2 million per grade and subject to develop one Maryland State Assessment, and there are continuing costs after the test is being used. In addition, under No Child Left Behind, every state has a different test and there is no national test that every student is given that allows student scores to be compared across state boundaries.

The inconsistencies between states, reports that American students did not perform as well as their peers in countries with national standards and the current recession may have spurred the governors to take action.

"This has been an evolution over decades, but I think [the recession] has underscored that the U.S. is not keeping up economically or in education," said Jennings.