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Common Core Is Common Sense for Higher Ed

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Co-authored by John Morgan, Chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents, and William E. (Brit) Kirwan, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland

In 2009, educators, teachers and stakeholders from 45 states came together to figure out how to make the education system better for our kids. The outcome is the "Common Core" -- a blueprint that ensures our students will learn what they need to learn to succeed in this day and age.

But change does not come without controversy. To be expected, there is opposition at both ends of the political spectrum. Critics on the Right argue the federal government forced these new standards on the states. Critics on the Left contend that the standards are being implemented too quickly.

The reality is neither claim is true.

Let's begin with its creation. The Common Core was not developed by the federal government. It was actually designed by K-12 teachers, college faculty, businesses and other stakeholders who collectively developed appropriate standards for our kids' schools. The new standards are higher than most states' previous standards.

And when it comes to implementation, most states rolled out the standards in classrooms two to three years ago, long before the new tests were given to measure student learning. Do we need to discuss when test scores can be considered a fair reflection of the implementation of the new standards? Maybe. Let's have that conversation. But it's not accurate to say the standards themselves have been implemented too quickly, and it's not fair to slow implementation when kids' futures are at stake.

One may pose the question of why we, as heads of major universities, would be writing on this topic since it relates to K-12? It's simple. Far too many of our high school graduates enter college unprepared and end up in remediation at our state colleges and universities. This has led to rising college dropout rates, and, ultimately, students and families saddled with too much debt and little to show for it.

Just look at the numbers. Nationwide, 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and 20 percent of students who enroll in four-year institutions need to take remedial courses. To make matters worse, of these students, only 17 percent will ever complete a degree or certificate. It is also an economic issue: colleges and universities spend \$7 billion a year on remedial courses while students shouldered an estimated \$3 billion last year. Imagine what

we could do with those resources if students arrived on our campuses better prepared.

The fact is, by 2020 almost two-thirds (65 percent) of all jobs will require at least some postsecondary education -- whether it's a career-training certificate or associate or bachelor's degree. To meet the needs of future employers, sustain our economy, and increase college completion, we must ensure that all of our students are prepared for postsecondary success when they graduate high school.

The Common Core can reverse this alarming trend and set our students on the path to success. Students who meet the Common Core standards will be prepared to enter our higher education institutions without the need for remediation. And our data show that students who can clear that bar are far more likely to persist and earn a degree.

But if you listen to the debates playing out in state legislatures around the country, the issues of student preparation and student success are not center stage. Instead we go back and forth about the federal role, whether we're moving too fast or whether there's too much testing in schools. These issues are a distraction from the deeper issue at hand, and in the meantime other countries continue to pass us in the education of their citizenry. If we were truly focused on what's best for our students, the debate would be over and the Common Core would be well on its way to full implementation.

The Common Core standards and new assessments aligned with the standards represent our best hope for driving meaningful improvement across K-12 and higher education. Higher education leaders have a lot at stake in this debate, and it's time for us to make our voices heard.

Higher education leaders from red, blue and purple states are unified in our support of the Common Core. Instead of slowing down or scrapping the Common Core, we say let's get on with it.

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