Editorial: Calif. slow to prepare for curriculum changes

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While education reformers in Sacramento continue to obsess about how easy it should be to fire teachers and how important tests should be in evaluating their performance, almost no one is talking about the central issue of what students are supposed to be learning in the near future.

A sea change is coming to schools in California, one of the 45 states that have adopted what are known as the Common Core State Standards. The idea of the new standards is to bring some consistency to education from state to state, and to better prepare students for the work they'll be expected to do in college and their jobs. Though the Obama administration couldn't legally force new standards on states, it threatened to deny grant money under the federal Race to the Top program if they didn't create and adopt common standards.

The standards are designed to push students to deeper levels of understanding and analysis. They call on teachers to cover fewer topics but to delve into each more thoroughly, and they discourage rote learning in favor of fuller understanding of the material. In math, for example, it might be less important for students to give the correct answer to a problem than to be able to describe the best process for reaching the solution. In California, the curriculum standards and the new tests that go with them are supposed to be implemented in the 2014-15 school year.

That's soon, and at the rate California is going, it won't be ready. The core curriculum standards lay out extensive

guidelines about the knowledge and skills that students should master in each grade of public school, in both reading and math. But there are many complicated steps involved in turning those guidelines into a day-to-day educational plan for California schools, and the state isn't even close to halfway through them. It hasn't figured out how to go about training teachers, and won't begin to adopt new textbooks — a slow and politically rancorous process — for at least two years.

What's more, common core is expensive, requiring extensive new training for teachers, new textbooks and computers on which the new tests must be taken. It's unclear where the state will find the money.

At the rate the state is going, teachers will end up being trained before the English curriculum is even in place, and instruction would start before the new textbooks are in anyone's hands. Yet if the school reform movement has its way, teachers will be evaluated in part based on how well their students do on the very different standardized tests that go with the new curriculum. Reflecting the concern that teachers throughout the state have been expressing, one California teacher recently tweeted that within a couple of years, "we start testing on standards we're not teaching with curriculum we don't have on computers that don't exist."

Teachers justifiably fret that they're being set up for failure. Schools worry about finding the money to make all this happen.

The situation led Arun Ramanathan, director of the reform organization Education Trust-West, to write a recent commentary for an education website saying: "Is this the best time for reformers to focus so much attention in Sacramento on teacher evaluation legislation incorporating student growth? Or should we be working to focus policymakers on the investments necessary to prepare all teachers to successfully teach the new standards in order to accelerate student

growth?" Considering that one of Education Trust-West's major objectives has been to include test scores in teacher evaluations, these are remarkable — and crucially important — questions.

Experts are divided over the value of the new curriculum standards, which might or might not lead students to the deeper reading, reasoning and writing skills that were intended. But on this much they agree: The curriculum will fail if it isn't carefully implemented with meaningful tests that are aligned with what the students are supposed to learn. Legislators and education leaders should be putting more emphasis on helping teachers get ready for common core and giving them a significant voice in how it is implemented. And if the state can't get the right elements in place to do that by 2014, it would be better off delaying the new curriculum a couple of years and doing it right, rather than allowing common core to become yet another educational flash in the pan that never lives up to its promise.