Roadmap for a Successful Transition to the Common Core in States and Districts

By Carmel Martin, Max Marchitello, and Melissa Lazarín   June 2014

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Introduction and summary

The Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by more than 40 states, are one of the most important reforms to American public education in decades.[1] The standards will improve the quality of education by creating a roadmap for the knowledge and skills students need to know to be successful in the 21st century. If implemented correctly, the new standards will make rote memorization, simplified curricula, and bubble tests things of the past. Instead, students will be taught critical thinking and reading skills, including using data to problem solve and construct arguments, and to be stronger writers. The Common Core also will encourage changing the classroom experience. Students will work together and delve more deeply into complex concepts, and engage in project- and discovery-based learning. Importantly, the Common Core will give parents confidence that the standards used to teach their children are evidence-based and aligned with what they will need to be successful after high school—not just in college, but in their careers and in life.

Despite the many benefits of the Common Core, its bipartisan support, and the widespread adoption and integration into state plans to redesign their education systems, the success of the standards is in jeopardy. Several states are reconsidering their commitment to the Common Core standards and the aligned assessments.[2] Some on the far right are using the standards for political gain by claiming they are an attempt by the federal government to dictate education standards. This is despite the fact that the standards were created under the initiation and leadership of bipartisan state leaders and developed with absolutely no input from federal actors. At the same time, there are legitimate concerns about the implementation process. It has been uneven and many teachers and parents are unfamiliar with the standards. Educators across the country are concerned that they have received inadequate support and have not been sufficiently engaged in the implementation process. Many teachers are apprehensive about the use of student performance on the new assessments in teacher evaluation.[3]

These are all valid concerns, but the good news is that they can be addressed. Indeed, states across the country are getting many aspects of implementation right. Although no state has implemented the standards perfectly, there are many examples of best practices to help states course correct where needed without compromising the integrity of the Common Core or the benefits it will have for students. Building on these best practices, we recommend that states and districts focus their efforts on nine critical steps required to effectively translate standards into high-quality instruction. Specifically, states and districts should:

- Administer better, fairer, and fewer tests.
- Continue to improve and implement education evaluation and support systems but phase in high-stakes consequences for teachers and students that are based on the new Common Core-aligned assessments.
- Maintain accountability systems based on disaggregated student results on state assessments using the outcomes of the system to target more dollars and resources to students and schools that are struggling.
- Ensure that teachers are engaged in the development of—and have access to—comprehensive curricula and instructional materials aligned with the Common Core standards.
- Invest in training and ongoing professional development for educators.
- Provide teachers with more time for ongoing professional development as well as to plan and collaborate together.
- Engage educators, parents, and other stakeholders in the implementation effort.
- Assist districts and schools to further develop their technological capacity to support the new computer-based Common Core assessments and provide instructional tools that allow for more individual instruction.
- Leverage additional resources to improve the Common Core implementation process.

Revamping state education systems to meet the demands of the 21st century is a difficult endeavor and states must undertake the transition responsibly with fairness to students, families, and teachers. These recommendations chart a practical way that states and districts can realize the benefits of the Common Core and improve the quality of education for all students. This report provides examples of states or districts tackling each of the actions outlined by these recommendations.

Recommendations

1. States and districts should administer better, fairer, and fewer tests.

Testing is critical to ensuring students receive a high-quality education, but some parents and other stakeholders have valid concerns that students spend too much time taking exams and that tests have become the goal rather than a means to an end—learning. Current state assessments also do a poor job of measuring student knowledge, and do not usefully assess whether students have met the more rigorous expectations of the Common Core. An analysis of 17 state assessments found that none of the math assessments and only 6 percent of the English language arts assessments tested deeper learning concepts.[4] The Common Core consortia assessments are designed to address these problems.

Two groups of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia, or SBAC—have worked together to build two new, next-generation assessment systems aligned with the Common Core. These new tests move beyond traditional multiple-choice exams. Similar to the Common Core standards, which require students to learn to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, the aligned assessments will test more complex thinking, reading, computation, and writing skills.

Furthermore, since the states are working together to develop these new assessments, the tests will be consistent and comparable across states. Therefore, students and parents can have confidence that what constitutes proficiency will be consistent even if they move across state lines. This will be helpful especially to highly mobile families, including military families.

The practice of teaching to the test and weeks of drill-and-kill test prep should no longer be seen as useful strategies since the assessments test high-level problem solving and require students to show their thought processes. Because these tests are computer-based, they should shorten the amount of time it will take to provide feedback to teachers on where students are and where they need additional help.

The new Common Core tests also provide states and districts with the opportunity to reduce the number of locally required standardized tests—which are often layered on top of state assessments in order to fill the gaps in state assessments. For example, the average seventh-grade student in Denver, Colorado, spends 14 hours per year taking district-level standardized tests.[5] States and districts should conduct an assessment audit to determine which tests best assess student progress against high standards and support instruction. Unnecessary tests should be eliminated.

After switching to the Common Core-aligned assessments, it is likely that initially, student scores may drop. This is to be expected when switching to new, more challenging standards. However, educators, parents, and other stakeholders should have confidence that these new tests will reveal a more accurate picture of students' academic preparedness and provide greater transparency around achievement gaps.

District of Columbia: In January 2014, the District of Columbia Public Schools, or DCPS, established a testing task force to minimize student time and stress related to standardized testing. The task force will conduct an assessment audit and determine which tests are unnecessary and can be abandoned. There are 27 members on the task force, including teachers, principals, instructional coaches, and content specialists. Furthermore, the members will work with parents, students, and other stakeholders to make recommendations to ensure the district only administers essential tests.[6]

New York: The Board of Regents and the New York Department of Education are working to restrict how much students are being tested. The initiative includes eliminating double testing in the eighth grade, and through New York's Race to the Top funding, offers grants to districts to review all local assessments and reduce local standardized testing by retaining only those exams that best inform instruction and improve student learning.[7] In January 2014, the U.S. Department of Education granted New York's double-testing waiver request. As a result, districts will be able to administer only the Common Core-aligned Regents examination in Algebra I and Geometry to students in seventh and eighth grade.[8]

U.S. Department of Education: In June 2013, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sent a letter to chief state school officers announcing that states could apply for a double-testing waiver while states transition to new assessments aligned with their college- and career-ready standards. States were eligible to request a one-year waiver to allow schools participating in the field tests of the new Common Core-aligned assessments to administer only either the field test or the current state assessment in the 2013-14 school year.[9] Sixteen states applied for the double-testing waiver.[10] To date, 14 have been approved.[11]

2. States and districts should phase in the use of high-stakes consequences for teachers and students tied to the newly adopted Common Core-aligned assessments.

Over the past few years, school districts have worked to redesign their educator-evaluation systems to make them a much more effective tool in providing feedback to teachers about their instructional practice, and to better identify and expand the reach of effective teaching. A meaningful system of teacher evaluation that assesses teacher performance across multiple measures, including multiple observations of classroom instruction, student feedback, and measures of achievement gains based on assessments over multiple years,[12] can fairly and reliably identify effective teaching. Districts in most states have been revamping their evaluation systems in the past few years to include these features, and these efforts should continue. Particularly now that the more rigorous standards are reaching classrooms across the country, stronger evaluation systems are an essential tool to ensure that teachers have the skills and knowledge necessary to teach to these standards.

Teacher-evaluation systems also are a critical tool for ensuring equitable access to effective teachers. In a 2011 study of 10 school districts across 7 states, the National Center for Education Evaluation found an "overall trend that indicates that low-income students have unequal access, on average, to the district's highest-performing teachers," and the distribution of effective teachers is uneven within and across districts. For example, across the entire sample, in middle school language arts, the lowest-poverty schools accounted for 32 percent of highly effective teachers compared with only 12 percent in the highest-poverty schools.[13] These disparities matter. The gap in achievement for students taught by a teacher in the top quartile of teacher effectiveness compared with a teacher in the bottom quartile can amount to a difference of two to three months' instruction.[14] The disparity in the impact of the most and least effective teachers is even more significant: A recent study of the Los Angeles school district found that a student taught by an English language arts teacher in the top quartile is on average six months ahead of a student taught by a bottom-quartile teacher.[15]

In order to increase the likelihood that all students have access to a top-tier teacher, districts and schools must identify the strongest teachers and pinpoint the weaknesses of others to help them improve their practice. The evaluation systems that districts are currently implementing based on guidelines supported by research will help accomplish this challenging task.

At the same time, educators are understandably concerned about how evaluation results that are based, in part, on student performance on the new, more rigorous Common Core tests will affect them. Districts and schools should begin using their educator-evaluation systems to provide teachers with useful feedback and professional development to help improve their practice. The results of teacher evaluations will also help states, districts, and schools staff classrooms and schools that are struggling academically with the strongest teachers. Information from the new assessments should be used for these purposes. But the assessment results should not be used to make high-stakes decisions with respect to teachers or students until there has been an opportunity for teachers and school systems to transition to the new assessments.

We recommend that states and districts continue to implement and refine their educator-evaluation systems but follow a gradual three-year plan to incorporate high-stakes consequences based on test results. In the first year that the new Common Core-aligned assessments are used for all students, states should not include student performance on a new test to make any high-stakes decisions.

In the second year, states and districts—especially those that are adequately prepared and have stakeholder support—should have the discretion to use student test data to inform personnel decisions. Finally, once states reach their third year of using a Common Core-aligned assessment, all states and districts should include student test data to inform personnel decisions.

Throughout this process, states and districts should share evaluation results, including the impact of student growth, with teachers and use the data to inform professional development and other efforts to support instructional improvement. This gradual, step-by-step approach affords teachers additional time to acclimate to the new standards and assessments while maintaining the integrity and utility of the state evaluation systems.

Having the ability to identify the strongest teachers and help others improve their practice is paramount. The new evaluation systems help accomplish this important objective. It would not be prudent to stall these efforts.

New Haven Public Schools, Connecticut: In the fall of 2009, New Haven Public Schools, or NHPS, and the New Haven Federation of Teachers, or NHFT, signed a new teachers' contract after working together to build a new teacher-evaluation and development system, known as TEVAL.[16] TEVAL is a part of the broader School Change Initiative, which strives to close the performance gap between New Haven students and the rest of the state within five years, decrease New Haven's dropout rate by half, and ensure all students graduating from the New Haven Public Schools are adequately prepared and have the financial resources to be successful in college.[17]

The new teacher-evaluation system marks a significant departure from previous practice. TEVAL prioritizes teacher development and coaching while emphasizing professional feedback from managers through periodic conferencing instead of simple classroom observations. Furthermore, it provides a clear and detailed performance rubric that allows administrators to provide frequent feedback to teachers and includes student growth as a factor in evaluations.[18]

At the end of the year, all teachers receive a performance rating—50 percent of which is based on student growth on state tests and the other 50 percent on classroom observations. Ratings range from one to five for each of the following components:

- Student-learning outcomes measured by growth in student learning
- Teacher instructional practice measured by manager observations of planning, preparation, practice, and reflection
- Teacher professional values measured by manager observations of professionalism, collegiality, and high expectations for students[19]

As a result of the TEVAL process, teachers receive one of five ratings: exemplary, strong, effective, developing, or needs improvement. Teachers identified as exemplary are eligible for a variety of leadership opportunities and higher pay—a result of NHPS winning a $53 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education as a part of the Teacher Incentive Fund in fall 2012.[20] Teachers rated as "developing" receive a development plan, increased targeted development opportunities to improve instruction, and frequent support. Finally, teachers in need of improvement receive an intensive improvement plan and frequent support sessions with teaching coaches. Those teachers who do not improve sufficiently despite intense development support and intervention will be subject to immediate sanctions up to and including termination.

In the first year of the evaluation system, 34 low-performing teachers chose to leave the district.[21] Another 15 teachers were afforded another year to make adequate progress despite being eligible to be fired. Of those 15, only 2 remained in the "needs improvement" level the following year.[22] In the second year of TEVAL, 28 teachers, or 1.9 percent of the teaching force, left NHPS due to poor performance.[23] Despite contributing to the departure of 62 teachers in two years, teachers favored the system by a 2-to-1 margin.[24]

In 2013—the first year that teachers were eligible for termination after failing to improve to an "effective" rating after three years—20 teachers resigned from their jobs. That year, 79 teachers were rated as "developing," and 13 as "needs improvement." Superintendent Garth Harries believes this rating distribution is evidence that the system is working to improve the teacher workforce. Dave Cicarella, president of New Haven's teachers union, maintains his support for the evaluation system, calling it "very judicious." The union is not fighting any of the dismissals.[25]

3. States should maintain their statewide accountability systems based on disaggregated student results on state assessments during the transition to the Common Core and use the system to target more dollars and resources to students and schools that are most in need.

To achieve the expectations set by the Common Core, states must maintain a robust, statewide accountability system for all students, but particularly for those who have been traditionally underserved in public schools. During the transition to the more rigorous, Common Core-aligned assessments, states should continue to publicly report disaggregated student-performance data as required under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA. Beyond reporting, states and districts also should use the results of the accountability system to drive additional resources and supports to schools struggling to prepare students to meet the standards.

These measures are particularly important for schools serving high concentrations of low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners. According to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, eighth-grade mathematics assessment, African American students are approximately one-third as likely as their white peers to score proficient or advanced.[26] On the same assessment, affluent students are more than 2.5 times as likely to score proficient or advanced.[27] The disparities are even greater for students with disabilities and English language learners.[28]

Transitioning to the Common Core and holding all students to the rigorous standards of college and career readiness will be beneficial to all students, but especially to low-income students and students of color. If properly supported and resourced, the Common Core should support increased achievement of underserved students. According to a 2012 report from the Education Sector, an independent education policy think tank, those states with high academic and proficiency standards saw the most significant reduction in students scoring "below basic" on NAEP between 2003 and 2011.[29] For example, high-standards states such as Colorado and Massachusetts saw a 26 percent decrease in students scoring below basic, compared with low-standards states such as Alabama and Oklahoma, which only saw a 20 percent drop in students scoring below basic.[30]

The new standards and common assessments will also bring greater transparency to achievement gaps. In many states due to low state standards, very high percentages of students score "proficient," masking gaps between high-achieving and low-achieving students. Across the country, there is an alarming inconsistency between proficiency rates as estimated by NAEP—assessments that closely align with the Common Core standards—and those made by states' tests. For example, in Michigan, the state determined that 41 percent of its African American students were proficient in eighth-grade reading, while NAEP found only 11 percent met that threshold. Therefore, it is not surprising that approximately 35 percent of Michigan's high school graduates who enroll directly into the state's four- and two-year institutions require at least one remedial class.[31] Michigan is not alone in over-estimating students' college and career readiness. Nationally, in 2007-08, nearly one-third of African American and Latino students enrolled in remedial courses.[32]

By raising standards and aligning what students are expected to know and be able to do with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in college and careers, the Common Core takes a significant first step in closing these achievement and readiness gaps. But states must do more than simply adopt the Common Core standards.

States must also direct additional funding, resources, and supports to schools with high-poverty and high-need students. In particular, states should strengthen their school-funding systems so they are more equitable and target greater resources to schools serving students with the most need. In addition to direct financial support, resources can include initiatives and actions such as increasing learning time by reorganizing or expanding the school day; providing one-on-one tutoring and other direct instructional supports; and expanding summer academic programs.

Finally, state educator-evaluation systems will play a critical role in ensuring that all students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—have access to effective teachers. Teachers are the single greatest in-school influence on student achievement,[33] yet low-income students and students of color are more often taught by inexperienced or out-of-field teachers.[34] Using the results of educator evaluations and other measures of teacher effectiveness to identify the highest-performing teachers, states, districts, and schools should create incentives for their strongest teachers to work with students who need to make the largest achievement gains and provide additional support to teachers who need help mastering the standards and modifying their instruction to align with them.[35]

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina: Beginning in 2008, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district implemented Strategic Staffing, a program to improve student achievement by matching their most effective principals and teachers with the students who have the greatest needs. In its inaugural year, the district identified seven struggling schools to participate in the program and an additional seven schools in 2009.[36]

As a part of the program, the selected principals were allowed to recruit an assistant principal, a behavior-management technician, academic facilitators, and up to five teachers with proven records of improving student achievement to be members of his or her leadership team. Each of the new faculty members committed to serving at least three years in their new school placement.[37] To encourage educators to work in struggling schools, the program included financial incentives. Each teacher received an additional $10,000 for their first year of service and $5,000 for each the subsequent two years. Each principal received a 10 percent pay increase.

In the first review of the program, participating schools showed considerable student growth in proficiency on state end-of-grade and end-of-course tests in 13 of the 14 schools. One school gained 14 percentage points in reading, while two others improved by 10 percentage points.[38]

California: In 2012, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) and the California legislature established a new school-funding formula, the Local Control Funding Formula, of LCFF. Under this plan, districts receive an average of $537 more per pupil annually in base funding. The formula is also sensitive to the additional needs of low-income students, English language learners, and other underserved students. Specifically, districts will receive an additional 20 percent for each English language learner, low-income student, and foster youth.[39] Since the creation of LCFF, Gov. Brown has maintained his commitment to both more adequately and equitably fund California's schools. In his most recent budget proposal, the governor allocated $4.5 billion for the second year of implementation, which closes the LCFF funding gap by 28 percent.[40]

4. States and districts must ensure that teachers are engaged in the development of—and have access to—comprehensive curricula and instructional materials aligned with the Common Core standards.

The Common Core outlines the skills and knowledge students should master, but not the curriculum they should be taught. States need to support the development of curricula that are aligned with the new standards. The Common Core will only succeed in raising student achievement if students are taught with high-quality instructional materials.[41]

Yet surveys conducted by the National Education Association, or NEA, reveal that many teachers say they do not have textbooks and materials aligned with the standards.[42] Some publishers are inappropriately labeling textbooks and other instructional material as Common Core-aligned. For example, according to a 2014 study of three of Florida's fourth-grade math textbooks marketed as Common Core-aligned, the textbooks were misaligned considerably with the state's new standards. The study concluded that these textbooks will "systematically fail to teach the advanced cognitive demand levels called for by the standards. They will overemphasize some standards topics and neglect others."[43]

High-quality instructional material, resources, and supports also are key to ensuring that the specific needs of students with disabilities and English language learners are met. The increased rigor of the Common Core will be challenging for all students; however, it will be most difficult for students who face additional barriers and challenges. States and districts should ensure that instructional materials are appropriately tailored to meet the unique needs of these students to guarantee that they can access and master grade-level content.[44]

Indeed, some states are addressing these gaps. In California, the state department of education has developed extensive online resources on the Common Core for students with disabilities. The agency developed materials specifically for parents and students, covering general and alternate assessments, as well as instructional sessions to help teachers align student individualized education programs to the Common Core.[45]

However, building curricula and instructional materials can be difficult. Fortunately, states do not have to do it alone. One advantage of having common standards is that states can leverage high-quality, scalable resources developed by other states or math and literacy consortia. For example, the Literacy Design Collaborative[46] and Inside Mathematics[47] are national professional communities of educators providing curricula resources, content-specific professional development, model lesson plans, and instructional materials aligned with the Common Core. Many states rely on EngageNY,[48] an initiative of the New York Department of Education, which is a one-stop shop for policymakers, educators, and parents to learn about the Common Core as well as access toolkits, model lessons, data-driven instruction, and other materials aligned to the Common Core.

In some areas, teachers are not being tapped at the local level to help translate the standards into classroom instruction.[49] Robust teacher participation in curricula development will increase teachers' familiarity and comfort with both what they will be teaching and the standards that their students are expected to meet. Teachers can also make recommendations on what will be constructive in their classrooms and identify materials necessary for their aligned instruction.

Colorado: Since Colorado adapted the Colorado Academic Standards, or CAS, to align with the Common Core in 2010, educators have been deeply engaged in building curricula and instructional materials. To support the transition to the Common Core and ensure that educators are well prepared to modify their instruction to meet the new standards, the state established the District Sample Curriculum Project in 2012. The project has three main phases:

- **Curriculum overview samples.** Educators from across Colorado worked with the Standards and Instructional Support team to translate CAS into content- and grade-level specific curriculum overviews.

- **Area refining workshops.** In regional workshops held across the state, educators commented on the project, the curriculum samples developed in phase I, and offered recommendations on developing CAS-aligned sample unit curricula.

- **Instructional unit samples.** Educators from across the state worked with the Standards and Instructional Support team to build units based on the curriculum overview samples. During three-day workshops, district-level teams of general education, special education, English language learners, and gifted and talented teachers collaborated to plan instruction to meet the needs of all students.[50]

To date, 116 school districts and approximately 500 teachers have worked together on the District Sample Curriculum Project and have produced more than 650 materials aligned with the Colorado Academic Standards. The materials provide a starting point for teachers and offer examples of how to teach critical thinking and problem solving.

As a result of the project, a regional network of teachers was created who can share the resources, strategies, and best practices they learned in their home districts and schools. This is particularly important in Colorado, where there are many small schools and districts spread out across the state.[51] Furthermore, the curriculum overview samples, grade- and content-specific unit samples, project resources, instructional webinars, and a process to provide feedback are all made available on the Colorado Department of Education's website.

5. States and districts must invest in teacher preparation and ongoing professional development for educators.

Teaching to the Common Core and preparing students to reach more rigorous standards than ever before[52] requires teachers to change their practice and pedagogy. It is unreasonable, however, to expect teachers to accomplish this on their own. For a smooth transition, states should make considerable investments in ongoing and high-quality, job-embedded professional development that is content specific and teaches the standards, related curricula, assessments, best practices, and strategies. Districts and schools may need to restructure teachers' schedules to provide professional development of this quality.

Beyond acclimating educators to the Common Core, there must also be high-quality professional development designed to prepare teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students. In particular, teachers must receive guidance and support to effectively serve students with disabilities and English language learners.

This is no easy task for states and districts. Much of the professional development provided to teachers historically has neither sufficiently met the needs of teachers nor substantially affected student learning.[53] But there is evidence that if designed appropriately, professional development can improve student achievement. In 2007, the American Institutes for Research reviewed the most rigorous evaluations of the impact of professional development on student achievement and found that an average of 49 hours of professional development improves student achievement by 21 percentile points.[54] While the evidence is limited in scope and specific in nature, its implications are clear: Investing in ongoing, job-embedded professional development aligned to the Common Core is essential to improving student achievement and readiness for college and career.

Just as the demands on teachers evolve under the Common Core, so too have the responsibilities and expectations of school principals. Yet, according to the Schools and Staffing Survey, or SASS, the vast majority of principals report that their professional-development activities are predominantly ineffective.[55] Some districts such as Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia and Denver Public Schools in Colorado are redesigning their principal professional development to help principals focus on how best to coach teachers and are training principals on districtwide teaching and leadership frameworks.[56] For principals to be effective instructional leaders and support teachers as they transition to the Common Core, states must provide high-quality professional development to prepare principals.

Preparing the current educator workforce to meet the demands of the Common Core is only half of the equation; states must also work with teacher-preparation programs to ensure that they are tailored to meet the needs of the Common Core and the new rigorous assessments. With large numbers of teachers expected to retire in the near term,[57] it is critical that new cohorts of teachers are well prepared to teach to the Common Core and support student growth to standard. To date, however, schools of education still have a long way to go. The National Council on Teaching Quality analyzed more than 1,000 higher-education teacher-preparation programs, including on how well prospective teachers are prepared to teach the Common Core. Based on that study, only 10 percent of institutions earned three or more stars out of a possible four.[58] There must be a stronger, more concerted effort to improve schools of education to more adequately prepare teachers for the challenge of teaching the Common Core.

Delaware: The Delaware Department of Education developed an 18-month project—Common Ground for the Common Core—to train a network of guiding teams of educators to support the successful implementation of the new standards. Beginning in early 2013, more than 700 educators from more than 140 schools across the state collaborated on strategies to improve the transition to the Common Core. They also worked together across grades and content areas to delve more deeply into the standards and translate them into effective classroom practice.[59]

In May 2014, the Common Ground participants, superintendents, school board presidents, PTA representatives, state board of education members, and legislators met in the capital of Dover to share lessons learned over the first year of the project. Team presentations highlighted their successes without shying away from the challenges that they faced in implementing the standards and how they changed their practice to overcome those difficulties. The goal of the project is to build educator capacity to implement and teach to the Common Core.[60]

Maryland: In 2011, the Maryland State Department of Education established Educator Effectiveness Academies, or EEAs, to provide professional development directly to schools. Every school in Maryland sent a leadership team made up of the principal and one English language arts; one math; and one science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM, teacher to participate in the EEAs.

The EEAs were four day-long, in-person meetings held each summer in 11 regional centers across the state with follow-up webinars throughout the year to supplement the meetings and provide further support for the implementation of the Common Core. The meetings focused on unpacking the Common Core, translating the literacy standards into the other subjects, connecting the Common Core with teacher evaluations and state assessments, and planning to meet the needs of diverse learners.

As a result of the EEAs, each school has a team of master teachers, fully versed in the Common Core, aligned curricula and instructional practice, educator evaluation, and new statewide assessments. These master teachers develop and administer trainings and implementation plans in their schools.[61]

Arizona: The public universities in Arizona are leading the way in ensuring both current and future teachers are prepared to meet the more rigorous demands of the Common Core and the 21st century classroom. The Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University, or ASU, established a professional learning library, which includes more than 1,200 resources aligned with Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards. ASU Teachers College faculty continually produce, evaluate, and share lesson plans in the learning library, providing educators with model lessons and other strategies to provide instruction aligned with Arizona's new standards.[62]

ASU's Teachers College embeds Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards into their teacher preparation coursework and clinical experiences. The syllabi for all undergraduate and graduate classes are being revised to align with the standards. Students in ASU's Teachers College also participate in district-led professional development and training on the new standards.[63]

Finally, ASU's Teachers College leads a multi-institutional collaboration to provide professional development in Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards in math to educators across the state. The collaboration includes Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona.[64]

6. States, districts, and schools should provide additional time for teachers to collaborate and plan together.

To facilitate the project-based, inquiry-based learning and interdisciplinary opportunities required by the Common Core, teachers need additional time to prepare lessons and collaborate with their colleagues. But American teachers typically have little to no time to work with their colleagues during the school day. Moreover, teachers often receive only three to five hours weekly to use for independent planning.[65]

How teachers spend their time in the United States differs greatly from teachers in countries with high-performing education systems. For example, the number of days and weeks that American teachers work does not differ significantly from other high-performing nations.[66] However, U.S. teachers spend more than 1,000 hours per school year teaching in front of the classroom compared with Finland where teachers spend 550 hours to 700 hours per year in front of the classroom.[67] Abroad, direct instruction typically makes up less than half of teachers' workdays, with the remaining time spent preparing for class, collaborating with colleagues, and meeting with students and parents.[68]

Providing more and better learning time supports the effective implementation of the Common Core. Increasing time or reorganizing the school day expands learning time for students and affords additional time for educator collaboration, planning, and professional development.[69] Teachers consistently report that more time to identify instructional materials and prepare lessons aligned with the new standards is the most important resource for successful implementation of the Common Core.[70] Furthermore, discussing the Common Core with other teachers at school is the experience teachers most commonly reported as extremely helpful[71] and most valuable[72] in implementing the standards.

States and districts can support this critical transition by expanding the school day to include more planning time for teachers. In a study of 30 high-achieving, high-poverty schools with longer school days and years, more than one-third reported scheduling 15 or more professional development and planning days, whereas the local schools in nearby districts rarely exceeded 5 or 6 professional development and planning days.[73] States and districts could also reduce course loads for teachers to provide additional time for these activities.

Fresno Unified School District, California: For the 2013-14 school year, Fresno Unified School District, or FUSD, redesigned the schedule in 11 middle schools to embed professional development into the school day. The schools in the district alternate between their normal schedule and a single-schedule design. Without adding any additional time to the day, the new schedule affords core academic teachers a full day of professional development and opportunities for collaboration. On the alternative schedule, students take an intensive Common Core-aligned class taught by a "Plus Team," comprised of experienced educators, which affords the classroom teachers the time to collaborate. In this class, students work on Common Core-aligned, skills-based tasks such as citing evidence to support strong arguments.[74]

Newton School Elementary, Greenfield, Massachusetts: For the past six years, Newton Elementary has been collaborating with the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative[75] to "improve student outcomes in core academic subjects, broaden enrichment opportunities, and improve instruction by adding more planning and professional development time for teachers."[76] Since 2007, Newton Elementary has added 90 minutes of additional learning time and time for teachers to collaborate to each school day.[77] Teachers often use additional time to collaborate on designing unit and lesson plans, and to align instruction to the Common Core. For example, for a unit on colonial times:

> *In advance of their planning meeting, one teacher had reviewed the [Common Core] and highlighted the standards that this unit could address. Then, the Newton teachers spent their 45-minute meeting discussing how to address the specific standards identified and how to employ "top-down topic webs"—one of the school's common instructional strategies—in the upcoming lesson. Toward the end of the meeting, the team members divided planning tasks for the unit. One teacher agreed to develop the activities for the lesson; another took on outlining a research component, and the third agreed to focus on selecting specific texts.[78]*

Providing teachers with additional time to collaborate and plan allows them the opportunity to work together to determine how best to meet standards and share responsibilities to ensure their lessons are as comprehensive as possible. The initiative has resulted in significant growth in student achievement. Since 2008, Newton has increased the percentage of their students achieving proficiency on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, by 19 percentage points in English language arts and 16 percentage points in math.[79]

7. States and districts should engage educators, parents, and other stakeholders in the implementation effort.

Parents, teachers, community members, businesses, institutions of higher education, and student advocates must be engaged regularly for the Common Core to be implemented successfully. These key stakeholders can be powerful allies in supporting the new standards and in ensuring states undertake the necessary steps to prepare teachers to teach the standards and for students to achieve them. However, for parents and other relevant stakeholders to be engaged sufficiently in the transition to the new standards, states should expand their communications and outreach efforts. To increase the reach and efficacy of stakeholder engagement, states and districts should partner with supportive nonprofits and other organizations across the state.

When it comes to families, states and districts must be sure that they are prepared for depressed student-performance scores that may result from the more challenging assessments that will accompany the new standards. It must be understood that these scores do not represent a loss of achievement, but rather a more accurate evaluation of what students actually know and can do. In fact, the most recent poll of registered voters by Achieve—a nonpartisan education reform organization—found that the majority of those surveyed believe a drop in scores does not mean the standards are not working.[80] Nevertheless, states and districts need to work with parents and the community to ensure that they are not alarmed by lower test scores. Understanding where students actually are will form the new baseline of achievement data and is vital to building a more equitable school system focused on promoting greater achievement and gap closure.

States and districts must similarly engage teachers. Not only will it increase teacher readiness to teach to the Common Core, but it also recognizes that teachers are trusted ambassadors with parents and other stakeholders. A recent national poll of registered voters conducted by 50CAN—a nonprofit that works in seven states to improve the quality of education afforded to all students—found that teachers were the most trusted group to determine what is best for improving schools.[81] Therefore, active engagement with educators will increase their readiness to teach to the standards and make them effective partners in conveying the importance of the standards and assessments to parents and other stakeholders.

Kentucky: In 2009, Kentucky passed S.B. 1, or the Unbridled Learning act, which officially adopted the Common Core, required the state to implement new assessments aligned with the standards, and revamped the accountability system.[82] Shortly after the bill was passed, the Kentucky Department of Education, or KDE, launched a robust communications and outreach plan to engage stakeholders about the forthcoming changes to the state education system.

All of the communications around the new education system focused on two central themes. First, that "Kentucky was moving toward preparing all public school students for college and/or careers, and that effort would start as soon as a child entered the public school system." Second, that "the new assessment and accountability system would be more useful and deep and provide educators, parents, elected officials and communities with reliable data that could be used to move schools forward."[83]

It was critical for KDE to contextualize these efforts to ensure that parents and other stakeholders were fully aware that the ultimate goal of the Common Core is to improve education for all students. To accomplish this, KDE emphasized Kentucky's long history of state-mandated assessments and accountability; developed a variety of accessible resources about the standards for teachers and parents; maintained continual public communication about the standards; established steering committees and working groups of educators; and partnered with education organizations, nonprofits, and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

The expansive outreach campaign has helped the vast majority of teachers feel comfortable and ready to teach the Common Core standards. Last November and December, the Kentucky Department of Education conducted an anonymous, voluntary survey to gauge educator attitudes about the state's new standards. According to survey findings, 86 percent of respondents believe that they are prepared to teach the standards, and 90 percent believe that the new standards are more rigorous than the previous standards.[84]

8. States should assist districts and schools to further develop their technological capacity to support the new computer-based Common Core assessments and provide instructional tools that allow for more individual instruction.

The Common Core-aligned assessments developed by PARCC and Smarter Balanced are designed to be administered online. Although both tests will be available in paper-and-pencil form for three years,[85] states should invest in their technological infrastructure so that all students and teachers can benefit from the computer-based tests. States should use available federal funds under the E-rate program, which provides discounts to afford schools telecommunications and Internet access, to target resources to those districts most in need of enhanced technological infrastructure. Federal funding for assessment administration under ESEA may also be used to improve technological capacity.

Computer-based assessments have the advantage of providing test scores almost immediately to help teachers understand what their students have mastered and the areas in which they need to improve. In the case of Smarter Balanced, the tests will be computer adaptive, which will more precisely determine student knowledge and skills and allow students to be tested across a range of difficulty while remaining on grade level.

To benefit fully from an online assessment system, states and districts must provide professional development to teachers focused on interpreting the test results and using the information to improve classroom instruction. Finally, it is important that states ensure student privacy is protected. Parents, teachers, and community members must be informed of the strong protections students are afforded under the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA.

Increasing state and district technology capacity will also help connect what students are learning with their everyday lives, enhance instruction, and personalize learning. By using technology in the classroom, teachers can present material in a way that is accessible to today's students, and also more easily differentiate instruction to meet students' individual needs. Finally, improving access to technology and broadband will help states and districts expand the reach of effective teachers and more rigorous coursework to students who otherwise would not have access to them.

Rhode Island: Rhode Island has undertaken a Wireless Classroom Initiative to provide $20 million in technology grants to expand wireless access to classrooms across the state over the next several years.[86] Increasing bandwidth is perhaps the most important investment states need to make to improve their technological infrastructure. Building on existing support through the federal E-rate program, the state developed the Rhode Island Telecommunications Educational Access Fund, or RITEAF. This fund supplements the financial support of E-rate to ensure that Internet access is available and affordable in all K-12 schools and public libraries.[87]

Illinois: Spearheaded by Bloomington Public School District in Illinois, the Illini Cloud is a district-led initiative that allows participating schools and districts to save 30 percent to 60 percent in technology-related costs by sharing hardware, applications, data storage, and IT support.[88] The Illini Cloud provides an opportunity for all districts, regardless of size, to provide state-of-the-art computing, networking, and data storage. With the Illini Cloud, school districts have increased technology capacity and flexibility, greater computing mobility, and complete control over their resources and data.[89] More than 200 Illinois districts participate in the program.[90]

9. States and districts should use available resources and guidance to improve the Common Core implementation process.

Transitioning to new standards, new assessments, and educator-evaluation systems is certainly challenging, and states should leverage all available resources to ensure smooth implementation. There are a multitude of resources available to aid in implementing the Common Core, but CAP recommends the following because they are comprehensive and target different audiences involved in state education systems.

- **"Realizing the Potential: How Governors Can Lead Effective Implementation of the Common Core State Standards" by the National Governors Association**[91]
Governors have a critical role to play in setting priorities and direction the state will follow. Governors provided strong leadership in the creation of the standards and can be an extremely effective champion of successful implementation. This report highlights strategies to effectively communicate the state's vision for reform, engage stakeholders, build capacity and curricula, develop impactful assessment and accountability systems, and maximize resources and limit costs.

- **"Implementing Common Core State Standards and Assessments: A Workbook for State and District Leaders" by Achieve and the U.S. Education Delivery Institute**[92]
This resource is intended to help state and district policymakers construct a practical plan to implement the Common Core standards and assessments. For those states and districts that feel implementation thus far has been uneven or incomplete, the workbook includes a diagnostic assessment to help determine areas where a state's implementation efforts have been successful and where more work is needed. The workbook then guides policymakers through strategies to organize for implementation, for effective implementation actions, and how to monitor and sustain progress.

- **"Implementation of the Common Core State Standards: A Transition Guide for School-Level Leaders" by the Aspen Institute and Society Program, Education First, Insight Education Group, Student Achievement Partners, and Targeted Leadership Consulting**[93]
School-level leaders play the most significant role in successfully transitioning to the new standards. This guide provides advice, planning tools, and metrics to help schools smoothly switch to the Common Core. In particular, the guide focuses on forming in-school leadership teams, ongoing professional learning, aligning instructional resources with the standards, and communicating effectively with parents and communities.

- **"Implementation of Common Core State Standards: Roles for Advocates"
  by the PIE Network and Education Trust**[94]
  With 40 percent of registered voters still unaware of the Common Core,[95]
  supporters of the higher standards can play a significant role in promoting the
  Common Core and engendering greater public backing for the standards. This
  guide helps advocates on transition planning, curricula, catch-up strategies, and
  other areas critical to successful implementation.

Conclusion

The Common Core State Standards present the greatest opportunity in decades to improve the quality of education afforded to all students. Uniformly raising standards across the majority of states and increasing the rigor of assessments sets an ambitious bar of college and career readiness for all students. Furthermore, assessing students against this more difficult benchmark will shine a bright light on schools and districts that are struggling to provide the caliber of education necessary for students to be successful. Armed with a more accurate picture of student performance, states and districts will be better positioned to direct resources and supports to students who need them the most. These new standards will also better prepare students to adjust to a changing economy by providing them with not just the base knowledge they need, but also the skills to be lifelong learners, effective communicators, and critical thinkers.

Effective instruction requires much more than rigorous standards and high-quality aligned assessments, but standards that are the foundation upon which good schools build effective instruction. The Common Core was developed based on a robust evidence-based process. The standards allow a tremendous amount of freedom at the classroom level for determining how to translate the standards for individual students. But the focus on 21st century skills, such as critical thinking and the use of data, will drive schools to incorporate strategies that educators have always known are beneficial to students such as problem-based learning.

It is true that the transition to the standards and assessments is difficult and will require patience, persistence, and continual parental and community engagement, with ongoing support and professional development for educators. But the tremendous benefits of the Common Core are too important to allow incomplete or inadequate implementation to undermine them. The good news is that across the country, states and districts are using promising and effective practices to implement the Common Core. The examples highlighted in this report are testimony to this effort. But more work remains, and states and districts should take note of best practices as they continue their transition to the Common Core.

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