

# Common Core State Standards

A Funder's Guide to Understanding Their Development and Impact in K-12 Schools

written by EDUCATION FIRST and GRANTMAKERS FOR EDUCATION

## INTRODUCTION

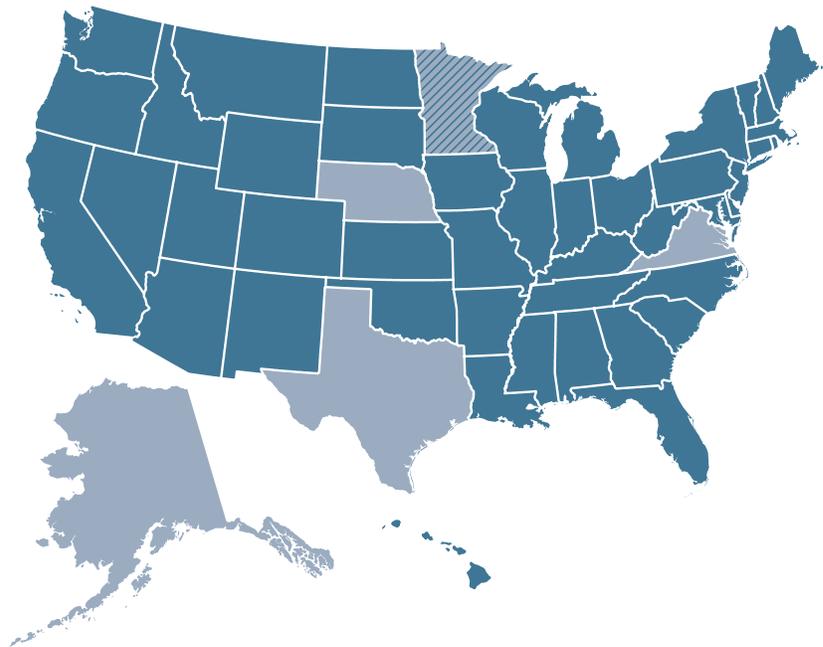
Announced in 2009 and subsequently adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia, the Common Core State Standards represent a new blueprint for what students in virtually every corner of the country will learn in English language arts (ELA) and literacy as well as mathematics.

According to their authors and advocates, these new standards present an unprecedented opportunity to elevate the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning in America's schools. They also create a common platform for developing and deploying higher-quality teaching tools and materials. States and local school systems are working feverishly to implement the new standards.

The Common Core is taking root in nearly every state, presenting significant opportunities and challenges. As districts and states move into the critical stages of implementing the new standards, funders need to understand the scope and scale of this effort and consider the implications for their work.

This guide—the first in a series by Grantmakers for Education—lays out the history of the Common Core, describes what changes it is bringing to public schools, and outlines challenges and opportunities funders should watch for in the work ahead.

## The Common Core States



 HAS adopted Common Core Standards  HAS NOT adopted Common Core Standards

NOTE: Minnesota has adopted only the Common Core standards for ELA and literacy. Although Alaska has not adopted Common Core, the Anchorage School District (37% of Alaskan students) has done so.

## About This Series

Regardless of how funders are working to support changes in public education—from grants to schools and districts to support of nonprofit technical assistance efforts to advocacy campaigns—the scope and sweep of the Common Core State Standards will impact grantmaking strategies. Grantmakers for Education is producing a three-part series of guides to help funders navigate the implementation of the new standards.

### The series includes:

- *Common Core State Standards: A Funder's Guide to Understanding Their Development and Impact in K-12 Schools*
- *Changing the Classroom Context: What Do the Common Core State Standards Mean for Your Education Grantmaking?*
- *High Need, High Impact: What School Systems Need to Succeed With the Common Core State Standards and How Philanthropy Can Help*

## MODERN HISTORY

Over the past two decades, much of the focus in American public education reform has centered squarely on raising academic standards—what students should know and be able to do in the classroom and in life—as a catalyst for driving change and improvement. Three basic principles undergird the standards-based reform movement:

- Students rise to the level of expectations set for them.
- All students—not just those from well-off communities—should be challenged to reach high standards.
- Effective approaches in other countries suggest standards are a necessary starting point for aligning everything else in the system: curriculum, teaching, testing, and supports for students.

Led by the nation's governors and CEOs, the modern push for standards reform began in the early 1990s, and Congress adopted national education goals in 1994 (Goals 2000). Within a decade, virtually every state had adopted its own set of standards to drive change, but most were meeting with only mixed results. The quality and coherence of standards, commitment to implementation, and support for educators and students varied widely from state to state—and even from district to district within the states.

Then, in 2001, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law ushered in a decade-long focus on accountability and testing, including a broadly supported emphasis on monitoring achievement gaps among students. In the states' scramble to respond to increased accountability pressures, many watered down their expectations, undermining the original intent.

Teams of educators and experts set out to create something entirely new: world-class standards that would be “robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.”

A decade later, in response to widespread recognition that students nationwide needed better preparation for college and career, states banded together in July 2009 to launch the Common Core State Standards initiative. The project was initiated by the states, for the states—developed without federal mandates or involvement. Led by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, the effort brought together educators and experts—with deep involvement of teacher unions and higher education—to create voluntary new standards for states in math and English language arts. Their aim was to create something entirely new: world-class standards that would be “robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.”

Within a year, 46 states and the District of Columbia—representing 80 percent of the nation's K-12 student population—adopted the Common Core standards as their own. For the first time, states would endeavor to educate American students according to a common set of expectations, benchmarked against those of high-performing countries.

By most accounts—including observers with differing political philosophies—the Common Core standards are an especially strong set of learning expectations and represent

a dramatic improvement over most states' prior efforts. Early on, National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel said the standards had “the potential to provide teachers with far more manageable curriculum goals.” America's business community echoed the unions' sentiments. Arthur Rothkopf, former head of the US Chamber of Commerce's Education and Workforce Initiative, called the state-led initiative “essential to helping the United States remain competitive and enabling students to succeed in a global economy.”

Two other developments spurred interest in the Common Core as well. In 2010, the US Department of Education urged states competing in the national Race to the Top competition to adopt “common” college- and career-readiness standards. Additionally, the department used a related set of federal funds to underwrite two state-led consortia committed to creating online common assessments aligned to the Common Core. Combined, Race to the Top and the common assessment consortia provided states with added inducement to move to the new standards.

To date, the number of states adopting the Common Core holds steady, although there is mounting pressure in a few states to roll back the new standards. In late 2011, for example, the Alabama State Board of Education rejected Governor Robert Bentley's

effort to do away with the Common Core. More recently, in spring 2013, Indiana's governor signed a law "pressing pause" on implementation and Michigan's legislature is also acting to delay implementation.

At the same time, the Common Core is closely intertwined with other state education reforms in ways that are complicating implementation. For example, some new teacher evaluation systems are based on student growth measures determined, in part, by performance on state standardized tests that are not yet aligned to the Common Core. The incongruity has led to calls for a grace period to allow the new standards and online assessments to be fully implemented before moving forward with new accountability systems. As one Maryland educator noted: "We're teaching the Common Core, we're testing on something else and evaluations are going to be based on all this. We're not opposed to accountability, but let's do something that makes sense."

Still, in most states, the focus remains on shepherding the new standards forward. Advocates now are realizing that passing new policies was easier than implementing them, particularly on ambitious timelines. By fall 2012, most participating states had implemented the standards in early grades and some began using them in all grades. All participating states are expected to be fully implementing the standards, across all grades, by fall 2014—just in time for

new common assessments to go online.

Given all this, it's more important than ever for funders involved in education reform to be aware of the Common Core and to understand the obstacles and opportunities ahead.

#### WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

Without question, the biggest challenge in describing the Common Core is explaining the difference between the new standards and old standards, which varied widely state by state. In addition to consistently higher expectations for the subject matter students should master at each grade level, the new standards seek to cultivate deeper learning by encouraging critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving.

The governors and state school chiefs most closely involved in the writing process adopted a mantra to describe what is different about these new standards: "Fewer. Higher. Clearer." So what exactly does this mean?

Education researchers have long argued that, unlike the expectations in most other countries, standards in most states (and thus the US) expect too little. The Common Core standards writers looked at what high-performing countries around the world expect of their students. They set a clear goal: Give students the skills and knowledge they need to successfully navigate college and living-wage jobs after high school graduation. Indeed, the starting

point in developing the new standards was engaging workforce-development experts and colleges and universities to determine the best outcomes, and work backward from there.

The shift to new standards means students now are expected to learn and master concepts earlier in schooling than before. To make this happen, teachers must focus longer and more deeply on fewer concepts in each grade, and emphasize more conceptual understanding and practical applications of ideas. Researchers like William Schmidt of Michigan State University have long argued that, compared to the expectations in other countries, standards in most US states were "a mile wide and an inch deep" and hampered students from mastering content before moving on to other topics.

In highlighting the difference between the new and old standards, the standards writers typically point to "three shifts" in each subject area. For mathematics, the Common Core shifts expect:

- **Focus: Narrow the focus at each grade level to key concepts, leading to stronger skills and fluency.**

"Rather than racing to cover topics in today's mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum, teachers...significantly narrow and deepen the way time and energy is spent in the math classroom," explain the writers. Indeed, an analysis of third-grade math standards by the Tennessee Department of Education revealed the Common Core reduced the total number of standards from 113 to 25. But of those roughly two dozen remaining standards, the measures are more complex, in some cases asking students to solve word problems in real-world contexts and requiring multiple operations skills.

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- **Coherence: Think across grades, and link to major topics within grades.** Principals and teachers “carefully connect the learning across grades so that students can build new understanding onto foundations built in previous years.”

- **Rigor: Pursue conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and real-world application.** The writers assert that the Common Core will help students “access concepts from a number of perspectives,” enabling them to “see math as more than a set of mnemonics or discrete procedures.”

For ELA and literacy, the Common Core demands an equally aspirational approach. With the standards designed to help students build content knowledge and reading skills, teachers now are expected to emphasize the importance of citing evidence from texts, especially informational and nonfiction sources. Since literacy expectations cut across the curriculum, they involve teachers from a variety of subjects, including social studies, science, and career-technical courses.

According to the standards writers, the Common Core should trigger three main instructional shifts in ELA and literacy, including:

- **Text: Build knowledge through content-rich nonfiction.** While the standards demand “substantial attention to literature,” they also require unprecedented attention to nonfiction content that, according to the standards’ writers, “plays an essential role in literacy.”

- **Analysis: Ensure that reading, writing, and speaking are grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational.** The Common Core puts a premium on students writing

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to sources and using evidence from texts to present careful analysis, well-defended claims, and clear information.

- **Complexity: Provide regular practice with complex text and academic language.** The Common Core emphasizes the importance of students accessing complex, grade-level text, building a staircase of rising text complexity and academic vocabulary so that students are college- and career-ready by the end of high school.

Among educators, the Common Core’s approach to balancing fiction and nonfiction requirements has proven to be the most controversial—and perhaps misunderstood—part of the new standards. As *The Washington Post* noted in a widely circulated report in late 2012, “English teachers worry that they will have to replace the dog-eared novels they love with historical documents and nonfiction texts.” Teachers reported removing poetry and short stories from classrooms to make room for essays and books on social behavior.

At the root of the confusion: Some educators still are coming to grips with the fact that, under the Common Core, building knowledge through nonfiction texts no longer is primarily the domain of English classes. The expectation to help ensure students can understand and use content-rich nonfiction now extends to other subjects. David Coleman, one of the Common Core lead writers who now serves as president of the College Board, said the fiction versus nonfiction debate has been

overblown. “There’s a disproportionate amount of anxiety,” Coleman told the *Post*, pointing out that the Common Core requires Shakespeare and classic American literature, and that nonfiction works can be taught in social studies and math classes as well. Among the examples he gives: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and Euclid’s “Elements,” writings on math and geometry.

Despite ongoing debate over the byproducts of the Common Core’s shifts, educators universally agree on one thing—the new standards are causing principals and teachers to dramatically rethink their approach to classroom instruction. Now, the challenge for states is to ensure quality implementation at all levels—from the state departments of education to local school systems to schools and classrooms. If implementation fails at any point in the chain, the standards may not deliver on the bold promise of improved outcomes.

#### HOW’S IT WORKING, SO FAR?

In most states, Common Core implementation is in full swing. During the 2012-13 school year, some adopting states had put in place the new standards across all grades in K-12. The remaining states expected to fully implement the Common Core by 2014-15 at the latest. A wide range of organizations—from national foundations to leading academic research institutions—are monitoring Common Core implementation efforts among the participating states and their local school systems. Early reports vary,

but two common themes have emerged.

First, educators generally support the higher expectations embedded in the standards and their shifts in teaching and learning, but feel anxious about the enormity of the transition. In early 2013, The Winston Group, a Washington-based polling firm, surveyed 900 K-12 public school teachers in 11 states and found that 73 percent of teachers have a favorable view of the Common Core. At the same time, 31 percent said they feel “overwhelmed” by the amount of change and another 44 percent said they feel “somewhat stressed.”

Second, principals and teachers are receiving significant professional development supports from state departments of education and local school systems—particularly those with Race to the Top dollars to spend. However, concerns abound about what happens when federal funds run out and how schools can sustain ongoing professional development until the Common Core becomes second nature in the classroom.

Recognizing these needs, individual teachers, vendors, and other materials developers are creating countless new tools—including sample assessment tasks and curriculum guidance—to support Common Core instruction. New web-based initiatives, such as New York’s EngageNY.org and Student Achievement Partners’ AchieveTheCore.org, are curating resources online. Student Achievement Partners is working with the nation’s two largest teacher unions, the National Education Association and American Federation

of Teachers, to develop and distribute free resources online. Nascent efforts, such as Student Achievement Partners’ publishers’ criteria and Achieve’s EQuIP, are emerging to help educators assess the quality of different instructional materials and resources and their alignment with the new standards.

In most states, the jury is still out on whether implementation is happening effectively. Funders will want to examine whether schools are meeting the standards’ underlying goals and achieving the key instructional shifts described above, and identify what else they need to be successful. Building instructional capacity and adequately supporting educators represents a major challenge for most states, districts, and schools.

To assess state progress toward implementation, Education First and the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center surveyed state education agencies across the country to gain better insights into planning efforts. The results, published in a February 2013 report, found that all 46 Common Core states and the District of Columbia reported having a formal implementation plan for transitioning to the new standards. Of those, most reported progress in planning around three key related areas of focus: teacher professional development, curriculum guides, and teacher evaluation. However, fewer than half the states—just 21—actually had completed and fully constructed plans for all three areas.

With uneven progress in planning, much work remains. A separate report

by the EPE Research Center found that teachers are concerned about their readiness to meet the challenge of the Common Core. Specifically, an EPE survey gauging preparedness attitudes among 600 teachers found that roughly half rated themselves 1, 2, or 3 on a scale of 1 to 5—with 5 being “very well prepared” and 1 being “not at all prepared.”

“Teachers are under tremendous pressure,” Lisa Dickinson, assistant director of educational issues for the American Federation of Teachers, told *Education Week*. “The new standards do require a major shift in instruction. And the needed supports really aren’t there.”

Jeanne Tribuzzi, an English teacher in West Seneca, N.Y., agrees. Tribuzzi told *The Washington Post* that, while the new standards are “well written,” local school systems are not giving teachers adequate time and resources to create better lessons and materials. Bringing together teachers “to do the work that needs to get done takes some intention...and money,” Tribuzzi said. “When those things are in short supply, teachers are not engaged in collaborative professional development, and that is what it is going to take to get them to understand the standards.”

These analyses and survey results reinforce what Common Core critics are saying.

A number of critics have raised concerns about insufficient attention to implementation challenges. Rick Hess, director of education policy studies for the American Enterprise Institute, in late 2012 derided the “dearth of attention to how the Common Core will complement or clash with other key elements of the ‘reform’ agenda,” including new teacher evaluation systems. Reform pundit

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Andy Smarick bemoaned what he called “miles of daylight between the platitudes...and the distressing reality of implementation.” Education historian Diane Ravitch argued the standards are too untested, turning states and schools into “guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown program at the same time.” Brookings Institute scholar Tom Loveless leveled more fundamental criticism of the standards-based reform movement overall, declaring: “The Common Core will have little to no effect on student achievement.”

Still, among educators in the field, there is emerging anecdotal evidence suggesting that the Common Core, while challenging, is changing classroom instruction and improving student learning.

John Mahoney, a math teacher at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in Washington, DC, said the new standards give teachers the ability to focus on fewer topics in more intensive ways, which in turn reduces the need for “re-teaching” in the future. “At our school, we are linking what we are teaching from year to year,” said Mahoney, an Education Champions Fellow with the nonprofit America Achieves. “We are focusing more on applications of mathematics and trying to ensure that our students develop a deep understanding of what they are learning.” He added: “I believe this work with the Common Core will give all students the opportunity to be successful in both college and in the workplace.”

Educator embrace of, and confidence in, the Common Core will be critical in the months and years ahead. Even Ravitch, a critic, acknowledges the jury will be out for a while. “I will remain open to new evidence,” Ravitch wrote in February 2013. “If the standards help kids, I will say so.”

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#### WHAT'S NEXT?

Clearly, the Common Core State Standards represent a major development in American public education reform. However, implementation of the new standards—and related work—is far from over. Looking ahead, the following challenges and opportunities remain:

- **Common assessments.** While the Common Core created an environment in which most states are demanding higher academic expectations, the transition to common assessments in 2014-15 also is important. These assessments, which will be administered online, will provide real-time data on student knowledge and help states and local school systems understand how their students measure up compared with peers in other states and communities. However, implementing common assessments will be equally challenging due to the cost of new technology and other expenses related to transitioning to and administering new tests. Funders should look for ways to encourage states and local school systems to make the investments necessary to successfully enable the shift to online assessments and consider how to address the challenges that will arise.
- **Educator evaluation.** At the same time the Common Core is being implemented, many states simultaneously are implementing or considering new teacher evaluation systems. The

collision of new standards with new evaluations has the potential to lead to disaffected teachers as well as confusion during implementation across the states. Where applicable, funders should understand how local school systems are approaching the integration of these efforts, and encourage them to manage those processes carefully.

- **Professional development.** Ensuring that principals and teachers have the training and support they need to implement the Common Core with fidelity is critical to the long-term success of the new standards. Funders who are interested in K-12 education reform should examine the extent to which quality professional development is available in their local schools and, if necessary, urge administrators to enhance their efforts.
- **Communications and stakeholder engagement.** Building ongoing support among parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders is key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Common Core and other education reforms. Interested funders should explore opportunities to support thoughtful communications and outreach efforts designed to build understanding of and support for the new standards.
- **High-quality materials.** New standards are only as good as the teachers teaching to them—and the

curriculum, materials, and other tools used in the delivery. These days, many vendors are marketing materials, including lesson plans and textbooks, as “Common Core aligned.” Funders who are interested in K-12 education reform should press local school systems and educators to be sure that old materials are retired from the classroom and closely examine the quality of new materials in order to ensure that they are, in fact, aligned to the new standards using rubrics like EQUiP and the Publishers’ Criteria.

- **Student supports.** Providing high-quality student supports is, of course, the most important priority of all. New standards amount to raising the bar, and yet many students still are struggling to meet the lower standards of recent years. This will be a particularly acute challenge for older students who must meet significantly higher standards in high school without the building blocks the Common Core provides in earlier grades. Every funder should have this issue on the radar, and be thinking about ways to challenge local schools and communities to respond. Funders should also consider how this development intersects with state and district policies, such as graduation requirements. This is an opportunity for funders to leverage their convening authority in a positive way.

In the two forthcoming guides in this series, Grantmakers for Education will explore how funders are adjusting their strategies to respond to the Common Core, and highlight considerations and opportunities for funders interested in investing more deeply around Common Core implementation.

## Resources

**Common Core State Standards Initiative**, the joint project of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governor’s Association (NGA). On the web: [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

**NGA**, the bipartisan organization of the nation’s governors that identifies public policy priorities at the state and national levels. On the web: [www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org)

**CCSSO**, the nonpartisan organization of public officials who lead departments of elementary and secondary education in the states. On the web: [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org)

**Student Achievement Partners**, the nonprofit organization founded by the lead authors of the Common Core State Standards. On the web: [www.achievethecore.org](http://www.achievethecore.org)

**Achieve**, the bipartisan organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. On the web: [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)

**Council of the Great City Schools**, the nonprofit organization representing dozens of America’s largest urban school systems. On the web: [www.cgcs.org](http://www.cgcs.org)

**Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)**, a consortium of 22 states working to develop online assessments aligned to the Common Core. On the web: [www.parcconline.org](http://www.parcconline.org)

**Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium**, a consortium of 24 states working to develop online assessments aligned to the Common Core. On the web: [www.smarterbalanced.org](http://www.smarterbalanced.org)

**Engage NY**, a comprehensive set of Common Core materials and instructional videos developed by New York State. [www.engageny.org](http://www.engageny.org)

### REPORTS & STUDIES

**Moving Forward: A National Perspective on States’ Progress In Common Core State Standards Implementation Planning**, a February 2013 report by Education First and the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. On the web: <http://www.education-first.com/files/movingforward.pdf>

**Findings from a National Survey of Teacher Perspectives on the Common Core**, a February 2013 report by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. On the web: [http://www.edweek.org/media/pe\\_survey\\_teacher\\_perspectives\\_common\\_core\\_2013.pdf](http://www.edweek.org/media/pe_survey_teacher_perspectives_common_core_2013.pdf)

**Implementing Education Policy: Getting from What Now to What Works.** A 2011 Education Grantmakers Institute report by Grantmakers for Education. On the web: [http://edfund.org/sites/default/files/institute\\_2011.pdf](http://edfund.org/sites/default/files/institute_2011.pdf)

### NEWS & ANALYSIS

**Curriculum Matters**, a blog published by Education Week and edited by veteran reporters Catherine Gewertz and Erik Robelen. On the web: <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/standards>

**Common Core Watch**, a blog published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and edited by policy fellow Kathleen Porter-Magee. On the web: <http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/>

## grantmakers<sup>for</sup>education

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