

High Need, High Impact

What School Systems Need to Succeed With the Common Core State Standards and How Philanthropy Can Help

INTRODUCTION

Announced in 2009 and voluntarily adopted by many states, the Common Core State Standards offer a new blueprint for what students in virtually every corner of the country will learn in English language arts and literacy as well as mathematics.

The Common Core—with a reordering of instructional priorities in the key subject areas—represents a fundamental shift in American public education. States and local school systems are working overtime to implement the new standards. Meanwhile, advocates and critics are engaged in spirited discourse over whether the standards can effectively drive improvement in K-12 education.

This guide—the final in a series by Grantmakers for Education—explores opportunities and challenges for funders to navigate the developments and debates around the Common Core, and it suggests high-leverage strategies for those funders that choose to get involved.

MEETING THE COMMON CORE OPPORTUNITY... AND CHALLENGE

Although the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards has been hailed as a major milestone in American education, the real work has just begun as educators focus on successful implementation and helping students achieve the standards.

The Common Core aspires to ensure students have the skills and knowledge to succeed in college and the workforce. They emphasize problem solving,



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 has produced 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*

analysis, writing, and critical thinking. They are internationally benchmarked and address what employers and universities say high school graduates need for success. Thousands of educators contributed to their development, and they represent a mainstream consensus for student learning in the 21st century.

Studies of high-performing education systems have shown that most, if not all, have high standards against which they measure progress. But adopting higher standards is just the first step in a series of coordinated efforts to enhance student learning. The standards specify the outcomes we seek for students—elevating the goals toward which our education systems are striving—but they do not provide the means to reach those goals. In order to improve student outcomes, the new standards must be translated into practice and carefully synchronized with many related reforms, such as higher-quality assessments and new educator performance evaluation systems.

Funders should consider how best to add value in their communities, recognizing that grantmakers play several important roles beyond funding: They also serve as conveners, advocates, and advisors. They are at times boosters of public education and, when necessary, challengers of the status quo. With the multitude of challenges and opportunities facing school systems and schools as they implement the new and ambitious Common Core standards, funders can play all these roles. In this guide, we explore two high-leverage opportunities for funders to impact the ground game for the Common Core in their communities: supporting quality implementation of the new standards and building and maintaining public will. We also share research, high-level recommendations and activities from a funder

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network—the Common Core Funders Working Group—that has emerged to help philanthropy be as effective as possible in supporting the implementation of the Common Core.

SUPPORTING QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION

It will take several years of sustained effort to realize the promise of the Common Core, and things may get worse before they get better. Education researcher and advisor Michael Fullan has written about the importance of managing the reform process through “implementation dips,” which he defines as “the inevitable bumpiness and difficulties encountered as people learn new behaviors and beliefs.” Funders supporting implementation must recognize that effective and long-lasting change requires time and persistence.

In most states, the jury is out on whether the Common Core is being implemented effectively—including whether frontline educators are getting the proper information, tools, and support they need to help students meet the higher expectations. Building instructional capacity and adequately supporting educators represents a major challenge for most states, districts, and schools, given both the higher demands of the standards and resource constraints. Consider the following:

- **Even though for many states the fiscal outlook is improving after the recession that ended in 2009, few states have significant resources to invest in helping schools transition**

to the new standards. And, where some new state funds are available, policymakers can benefit from advice for how limited resources can be used most strategically.

- **Many tools have been created to help educators assess whether classroom materials are aligned to the new standards, and many states have convened teams of teachers to develop new curriculum guides and sample lessons.**

But most teachers still confess to being overwhelmed at the choices and are in need of more user-friendly guidance to find the resources they need for their own classroom.

- **Helping thousands of educators learn about the new standards, and become confident and skilled at teaching them, is a huge challenge of scale for the field.** The easy and most likely route to solving this problem—offering one-shot training workshops rather than ongoing, job-embedded learning—is also the least desirable route. School leaders need help finding quickly scalable solutions.

With these broader challenges in mind, funders may want to examine how schools and school systems in their community are organizing to meet the standards’ underlying goals and required instructional shifts, and help pinpoint what they need to do to close implementation gaps. One starting point is for funders to ask district or charter school leaders to reflect on what went

well—and what didn’t—during the first year of implementation. Funders can create opportunities for candid reflection and analysis that may lead to important course corrections. In particular, funders should encourage district and charter school leaders to seek the input of frontline teachers and principals to take stock of how the work is going and pinpoint what is needed to strengthen the process moving forward.

Guided by this assessment, funders may choose among many different entry points to support Common Core implementation. Many school systems need support in acquiring or retooling curriculum or instructional materials. Most also need added capacity for teachers and principals to help them make the instructional shifts required by the standards. Boosting a school system’s capacity will require working in multiple ways to change policies and practice and not just relying on a single intervention. Even if you choose to support just one intervention, be thoughtful about how it aligns with other interventions taking place at the same time.

Aligned Instructional Supports and Materials

One significant contribution funders can make is helping ensure that teachers and schools are using high-quality instructional resources and materials that truly are aligned to the new standards. This doesn’t necessarily mean funding the purchase of materials. Instead, this assistance could mean urging local school systems to establish processes or adopt tools that can help educators to identify whether new materials are aligned and to separate good resources from those that fall short. Across the field, stories abound of vendors selling materials such as lesson plans and textbooks labeled

More than Money: Using Your Whole Toolbox to Influence the Common Core

Two decades ago, education philosopher and philanthropy provocateur, Paul Ylvisaker, outlined common-sense guidelines for funders seeking to effect change.

Today, Ylvisaker’s timeless advice provides a roadmap for thinking about how education funders—regardless of their grantmaking budget or geographic scope—can influence sweeping education changes such as the Common Core.

“Foundations do not need a lot of money to be effective,” Ylvisaker argued in his groundbreaking 1989 essay, *Small Can Be Effective*. “There are so many things we can do for the causes we care about. Grantmaking is only one of them.” He cited a range of ways funders can have an impact, such as convening, advocating, and leading on issues that matter.

In the context of the Common Core, Ylvisaker’s guidance is a reminder that funders can assume high-impact leadership roles, including:

- **Conceptualization:** Funders can fact-find, analyze problems, focus attention on gaps, and push for solutions. In the case of the Common Core, this role could include helping local school systems and schools spot areas in which teachers need to grow their skills and knowledge—and identifying professional development strategies to drive improvement. Grantmakers also can play an important role in helping education leaders sustain their focus on

high-quality implementation through the several years of work it will take to elevate teaching and learning to new levels of rigor.

- **Catalyst:** As community leaders, funders are uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders, accelerate work and provide objective insights about the path forward. Around the Common Core, for example, this could include encouraging local school systems or states to leverage the “common” spirit of the standards in order to jointly procure high-quality teaching materials and technology and thereby exert outside influence on the marketplace. Cooperative purchasing could achieve cost savings and provide a platform to support more consistent implementation of the new standards.
- **Critical voice:** Funders can serve as gadflies or advocates, and offer seals of approval for certain strategies and approaches. For example, funders can challenge local school systems and states to create new plans for improving stakeholder engagement around Common Core implementation and the transition to common assessments. Funders can also play an important role in building and maintaining public will for the standards, especially during predictably rocky transitional years.

“Common Core-aligned”—but they might not be. Although quality and effectiveness can’t ultimately be determined until materials are tested in the classroom and student learning results are available, helping to identify the most effectively aligned and promising

tools is an area that’s ripe for funder involvement. By helping school systems and states make smart purchasing decisions, funders can amplify their impact many times over.

Student Achievement Partners—led by some of the authors of the Common

Core—has worked in partnership with Achieve and the Council of Chief State School Officers to compile a toolkit of resources for evaluating how well instructional and assessment materials align to the Common Core. In addition, the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics developed its own Common Core “materials analysis tools” to help guide educators in selecting new materials. A key strategy for funders is to encourage school systems to leverage some of these existing tools for assessing materials, rather than creating their own. (*See the “Resources” section at the end of this guide for more information.*)

Still, evaluating materials with reliable tools is only half the challenge. Making sure that quality materials and support actually reach the classroom is something entirely different. In a project to learn more about implementation lessons and challenges from “early adopting” school districts that have implemented the Common Core, Education First researchers report a key finding: Teachers are in need of teaching materials aligned to the new standards. “It’s overwhelming to just hand them a rubric ... and tell them to rewrite an entire year’s worth of lesson plans, assignments and texts on their own,” one researcher noted.

Translating the new standards into practice should be approached systematically. Several states—including Colorado, Florida, Maryland and New York—are pioneering work with teachers to develop best-in-class curriculum modules, year-long instructional plans, and specific units aligned to the Common Core. Local funders can consider ways to help their districts, charter schools or states leverage these free resources—or they might support similar development efforts in their own communities.

They could also support state or national teacher networks to help educators understand what resources are available and how to use them.

Many exemplary materials are being created for educators, but gaps remain, old materials must be retired, and new materials must be assessed for alignment. Experts note some of the biggest gaps, where excellent tools and instructional innovations are most needed, include teaching strategies for helping English language learners, students with disabilities, and strategies for teaching literacy across all content areas—a key requirement of the Common Core. To help, funders can train and convene key grantees, district, and charter school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to analyze gaps in existing tools and strategies and identify organizations best positioned to help fill those gaps.

Additionally, funders can press local school systems and educators to be sure that the quality of new materials is closely examined to ensure that they are, in fact, aligned to the new standards. More specifically, they could help school systems determine which materials are most successful in the classroom by considering feedback and ratings from the educators using them. Another option is to support learning communities of teachers with common areas of focus to create modules, curricular units, and courses or offering innovation grants to encourage teachers to design and pilot new ways of helping struggling students achieve at higher levels under the standards. When investing in the development of new materials and strategies, funders should also think carefully about dissemination to ensure that these investments make it back to the classroom.

Supporting Quality Implementation

WHERE FUNDERS ADD VALUE:

- Recognize that change takes time and persistence
- Be prepared for implementation dips
- There are no silver bullets; change will require multiple strategies rather than a single intervention
- Provide space for district and charter school leaders to reflect candidly on progress and to course-correct

Building Teacher and Leader Capacity

“The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction,” concluded Sir Michael Barber, an advisor to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his 2007 analysis of the world’s best-performing school systems. Research demonstrates compellingly that teachers are the greatest in-school influence on student learning—and effective principals who can coach and lead teachers are a close second. Educators need the time and support to determine how to shift their instructional strategies to help students meet the new standards, making professional development another area ripe for funder support.

While educators regularly participate in professional development activities, the quality, time, structure and amount of support they receive varies dramatically, both from state to state and even from district to district within states. In many states with Race to the Top dollars to spend, both state education agencies

Supporting Quality Implementation: Ideas and Examples from Other Funders

In the coming months, as schools begin putting common standards into place in classrooms, ensuring educators have access to high-quality teaching materials, tools and professional development is one of the urgent and critical needs in the field. As grantmakers assess schools' unique needs and situations in their own communities, these grants and efforts from funders that are already working to support Common Core implementation can spark ideas for innovative ways of providing support:

In North Carolina, the **Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation** is supporting the Center for Teaching Quality to develop teacher leaders who can help other teachers implement the Common Core standards in that state. Working with three or four mid-sized school districts, the center will identify 20 effective teachers and train and support them to work with an additional 80 teachers (four teachers each). Later in the project, each of these 80 teachers also will be trained and supported to help four additional teachers with Common Core implementation, ultimately reaching 400 - 500 teachers in these districts.

➡ *Does your state or school district have similar teacher networks you could tap to provide leadership, training, and support to other teachers around Common Core implementation?*

Seeking to accelerate efforts to help teachers implement the Common Core standards, the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** invited teacher networks around the country to propose innovative ideas for rapidly spreading and scaling approaches to support implementation of the standards. The foundation wanted to leverage the expertise of teachers themselves in designing and implementing these strategies. More than 100 organizations responded to its open call

for proposals, and 21 organizations were funded with grants ranging from \$100,000 to \$250,000. Recipients range from the National Council of Teachers of English to the Arkansas Public School Resource Center to the Perkins School for the Blind, all of which will be expanding collaborative networks of schools and teachers.

➡ *How could you engage local organizations working with schools to spur innovation and more rapid and broader deployment of Common Core-aligned resources for educators?*

When New York State tapped Expeditionary Learning as one of its vendors to develop new, best-in-class English/language arts curriculum aligned to the Common Core standards, **The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation** saw an opportunity to help a grantee succeed and extend its impact dramatically. The foundation knew that Expeditionary Learning, with its experience operating schools that challenge students to develop critical thinking skills and new leadership roles, would create curriculum and professional development especially well-aligned to the expectations of the new standards. The foundation also knew other states and school districts around the country would adopt this curriculum if it truly was high quality. By providing extra support to fuel Expedition-

ary Learning's development efforts, the foundation helped Expeditionary Learning step up to the new challenge and quickly reinforced the capacity and leadership it needed to seize this opportunity.

➡ *How can you build on the existing expertise and resources in your community, helping effective organizations strengthen their capacity to serve more schools and educators? How can you build on grants from national foundations in your state by supporting local organizations' capacity?*

With its commitment to college access and success, the **Lumina Foundation** sees the Common Core standards as an important foundation for helping more students gain the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in higher education. To support the standards, it has funded efforts to strengthen alignment between K-12 and higher education systems and to ensure postsecondary placement policies are aligned with the Common Core assessments including, with other donors, several technical assistance networks of state leaders working on these issues. Through this support, several states have stepped up to find ways to bring higher education faculty and leaders to the table in understanding the new standards. For example, through statewide summits, regional meetings, and special task forces, these states have helped college leaders review and shape the new exams developed by the two state assessment consortia.

➡ *Even if your foundation doesn't focus on K-12 schools specifically, how can you build broader understanding and new capacities for this sea change in K-12 expectations within the education organizations and communities you do support?*

and local school systems have had targeted dollars to support extensive professional development for teachers on the Common Core; how to sustain these efforts after Race to the Top funding is complete is a major concern in these places. Meanwhile, in most other states quality professional development to support the transition to new standards may be lacking altogether. In all cases, ensuring all educators get the high-quality, ongoing support they need to successfully adapt the new standards into their classroom is a huge capacity challenge.

Moreover, strengthening the knowledge and skills of teachers and leaders in schools is an expensive proposition. At the very least, funders may want to establish clear grantmaking guidelines and expectations for the types of professional development activities they will support—and then fund only those efforts with sustainability and scaling strategies and those that have built in measures of effectiveness and continuous improvement. Funders engaged in this work can play an important role sharing results and making clear how other districts or schools can learn from and replicate successful efforts.

Funders can make a difference through direct financial support or simply encouragement. Funders can underwrite opportunities for educators to participate in learning communities or peer networks that address the new standards. Many models could guide this work, including the “lesson study” methodology used widely in high-performing countries such as Japan and Singapore, or the school-based collaborative learning communities in states such as Delaware and Kentucky. Alternatively, they might provide incentives and opportunities for schools, districts, and

Funders can play a key role in helping build and maintain public will in support of the new standards.

charter management organizations to create and repurpose time for teachers to understand and practice teaching to the new standards and to develop related sample tasks and lessons. Funders can help school leaders identify and deploy teacher leaders, and build and support teacher leader networks. Funders also can underwrite Common Core coaches to work one-on-one with teachers to provide the supports they need in adapting their lessons.

As with instructional materials, the professional development marketplace is awash with workshops and supports that profess to be Common Core-aligned. It is important for districts to assess the quality of these resources before investing significant time and funding in these efforts. Funders can help districts review professional development opportunities and ensure they are high-quality and aligned with the standards. They can also connect districts with the growing body of free resources that have been developed by organizations such as America Achieves or Student Achievement Partners, which have online video libraries illustrating instructional shifts. Funders can reinforce and help underwrite professional development activities that research suggests are most effective—specifically, activities that are content-based, data-driven, and job-embedded, and that include opportunities for practice and feedback.

Many strategies focus on teachers. Funders may also realize great impact by providing support to school and district leaders, too. Building their capacity can leverage more widespread change because of the critical role they play in

influencing teacher skills and knowledge. For example, funders may want to consider underwriting professional learning communities of principals or superintendents organized around problems of practice connected with the new standards. Too often, mechanisms for collaboration don't exist within or between school systems—and several funders are finding early success in helping districts confront the challenges of Common Core implementation in this way.

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 that 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.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING PUBLIC WILL

This is a pivotal moment in the public conversation around the Common Core. According to media reports across the country, the new standards are coming under withering political and public attack in multiple states, and the opposition is expected to grow. Despite the states' collaborative development and voluntary adoption of the standards, opponents on the right argue that the Common Core is a federal mandate. Opponents on the left are concerned about how the standards will affect teachers under new accountability systems, and about a perceived over-emphasis on testing.

Building and Maintaining Public Will: Ideas and Examples from Other Funders

Because of the higher expectations and greater challenges embedded in the new standards, states and districts must make a major communications push to help key stakeholders understand the Common Core. In states where the Common Core is meeting political opposition there is even greater urgency to mobilize the majority of educators, community leaders, and parents who support the standards. As grantmakers assess the unique needs and situations in their own communities, these grants and efforts from funders already working to support Common Core implementation can spark ideas for innovative ways of providing support:

With the Common Core's emphasis on the skills and knowledge students need for success in college and careers, the **GE Foundation** has been helping business leaders and employers understand the importance of college and career readiness to improve K-12 schools and become advocates for them. Its grantmaking has supported Student Achievement Partners, Achieve, Foundation for Excellence in Education, and others to engage educators as champions for the Common Core and to mobilize businesses throughout the country. In addition, the foundation has leveraged its own relationships and reputation to build support for the Common Core, sharing information and providing leadership on these issues within the business networks and associations where it participates. The foundation also sponsors an annual national business and education summit each summer where it highlights this agenda, drawing senior executives from companies as diverse as 3M, Boeing, Chevron, and Microsoft.

➡ *Building public will for change doesn't have to happen solely by funding other organizations. How can your foundation use its influence, relationships and networks directly to exert leadership, convene stakeholders, and communicate about the Common Core?*

With the future of Common Core standards hazy in Michigan legislators voted recently to cease state funding for implementation activities until the standards could be vetted further—the advocacy organization **Education Trust-Midwest** recognized the need for a better understanding of public opinion about the standards. With the help of several foundations that contributed resources, Ed Trust-Midwest worked with Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner to field a statewide survey of likely Michigan voters. The poll findings were consistent with national polls, which consistently show strong public support for higher, college-readiness K-12 standards (even if not everyone has heard specifically of Common Core standards). Ed Trust-Midwest expects the polling data to help inform its advocacy strategy and better educate the public and policymakers about the standards.

➡ *How well do policymakers, educators, and parents in your community understand the Common Core? How can you help Common Core advocates gather better information about local opinions—and then use that information to inform and strengthen their communications efforts?*

In Tennessee, advocates have learned that it pays to build a broad-based coalition to create public will for education reforms. The **State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE)** is leading efforts to build statewide and local support for Tennessee's efforts to raise the bar through the Common Core State Standards. SCORE, a nonprofit organization founded by former US Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, launched the Expect More, Achieve More Coalition, a statewide alliance of business, community, and education organizations that support high academic standards in public education so that every student graduates high school prepared for college and the workforce. With support from philanthropic partners, SCORE is expanding the number of coalition members, broadening the coalition's outreach and activities, and supporting the implementation of the Common Core State Standards across the Volunteer State.

➡ *Which stakeholders need to be at the table in your community to nurture public will for the Common Core? Are there existing coalitions that would be well-positioned to advance this work? What kinds of support do they need in order to be effective?*

As a result, anti-Common Core campaigns are emerging in states across the country—some organic, but many highly coordinated and well-funded. This is prompting state lawmakers to consider measures designed to slow down or halt the standards' implementation. One emerging tactic, according to Education Week, is to disrupt the Common Core by attempting to de-fund implementation efforts in state budgets. This method is attractive for legislators who can't pass stand-alone bills halting the Common Core but will engage in "11th-hour horse-trading," noted Michael McShane, a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Emboldened by early traction in a handful of states—including Indiana and Michigan—critics are now setting their sights on other states. Their ultimate goal is to enact new state laws to undermine or altogether undo the Common Core.

If they choose to do so, funders can play a key role in helping build and maintain public will in support of the new standards. Some foundations have chosen to exercise their voice directly, publishing opinion pieces and convening key stakeholders to express support for the Common Core. Others have chosen to fund advocacy groups to support the work. The reality is, the Common Core—with its focus on raising expectations for how well students write, solve problems, and think critically—represents the culmination of reforms that many grantmakers have been trying to advance in isolated efforts. Now, funders can use

their resources and bully pulpit to help protect and advance the new standards. "You have to honor your nonpartisanship," noted one foundation executive. "But in some cases, you have to speak up if you believe in the approach."

Across the country, advocacy efforts are gearing up in states to help build and maintain public will for the Common Core. Some efforts focus on building deeper understanding among lawmakers and include actively dispelling myths and challenging efforts to roll back the standards. Others are focused on helping educators understand the instructional shifts in the new standards and strengthening their voice as advocates with their peers. Still others are launching campaigns to educate parents and the public about the pressing need for higher expectations in the classroom and to ignite a groundswell of public support and understanding.

In some states, national organizations such as Stand for Children (with 11 state chapters) and the Foundation for Excellence in Education are stepping forward to help. Elsewhere, state organizations and coalitions are leading the work, including groups such as Alabama's A+ Education Partnership, Advance Illinois, Expect More Arizona, and the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education. Local funders support most of these and other efforts. Still, in some states, advocacy initiatives may be minimal or altogether lacking. In those situations, funders may want to use their convening authority to bring together key stakeholders to stimulate

action. Funders may also consider ways to leverage their relationships with other key stakeholder groups, such as the business community, which can provide powerful local voices in support of reform.

In many states, advocacy needs will increase with the approach of new online assessments expected to arrive in the 2014-15 school year. Designed to measure student performance under the new standards, most states plan to use new exams jointly developed with other states through two testing consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. At the same time, some states are considering developing their own tests or using private testing services, such as ACT, to measure student and school performance against the standards. The quality of these privately developed options is, however, less clear.

These new assessments aim to be more sophisticated exams that are superior to the off-the-shelf bubble tests. The new assessments also come with a package of teacher-friendly tools, including banks of interim and formative assessment items to help educators monitor and guide student progress. Many experts see the new tests as inseparable from the new standards. Prior experience in standards-based reform suggests that standards must be reinforced by rigorous, high-quality tests if they are to be implemented fully. Furthermore, they provide an important opportunity for comparing student knowledge and progress across states.

Additionally, to match the deeper skills and knowledge required by the Common Core, the new assessments will be more rigorous than most states' current standardized tests, requiring students to do more writing and

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problem-solving in context. It's likely, at least in the short term, that students' proficiency rates will drop sharply—as they have in New York and Kentucky when these two states rolled out early version of Common Core-aligned tests—increasing the anxiety of kids, teachers, and parents, and potentially spurring a retreat from the new standards and tests.

But quality comes at a price. The cost of new technology to support the tests—buying devices and deploying additional bandwidth inside the schools—is expected to be a stumbling block in many states and school systems. Moreover, policymakers and legislators may resist appropriating funds to pay for potentially more expensive testing. Just as some opponents are lobbying legislators to deny implementation funds for the new standards, other opponents are pushing state leaders to pursue lower-cost, lower-quality testing options or drop out of the PARCC or SBAC assessment consortia. Funders can play an essential role in helping state education policy leaders understand the value proposition of the common assessments. The reality is: Standards, no matter how good, aren't very helpful if they aren't well-measured.

Building and maintaining public will in support of the Common Core and common assessments will be critical to ensuring the successful implementation of these comprehensive reforms. Funders can play an important role as conveners and advocates to build deeper understanding of and support for the Common Core among key stakeholders in their communities and to hold districts accountable for maintaining a steady focus on quality implementation. Advocacy and communications strategies and infrastructure that are being

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developed to protect and advance the Common Core may be re-deployed in the future to support the coming shift to common assessment.

IDENTIFYING OTHER ENTRY POINTS: A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

If your organization is still determining how, or if, to get involved with the Common Core, consider guidance that emerged in early 2013 from a collaborative known as the Common Core Funders Working Group. The working group—comprised of national and local funders including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, GE Foundation, The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation—began collaborating in late 2012 to better understand the challenges associated with implementing the Common Core. The collaboration is supported by the Education Funders Strategy Group, Grantmakers for Education, and Growth Philanthropy Network.

The Common Core Funders Working Group examined the entire system of schools, districts, charter-management organizations, state agencies, and partner organizations that will influence whether the new standards succeed or fail. What emerged was a systems map, a detailed diagram highlighting the complexities and interdependencies in public education, and exploring which parts of the system need attention in order for the Common Core to succeed. Led by

Peter Senge, a leadership expert from the MIT Sloan School of Management, the mapping process looked at the causal connections—actions that lead to other actions—and the ability of key constituencies to influence the system, including teachers, principals, parents, and policymakers.

Several key lessons emerged from the systems map that can help inform funders considering how to support Common Core efforts in their communities:

- **The K-12 system is complicated.** Many actors and influences drive priorities, programs, and decision-making. Boosting the education system's capacity to deliver on the higher expectations of the Common Core standards will require working in multiple ways to change policies and practice—a single intervention is unlikely to yield results.
- **One challenge of working in a system is that everything is connected.** Investments in one area produce ripple effects in other areas. When funders choose to invest in a crowded space with multiple funders and actors, they should consider coordinating with other investments and efforts in that space.
- **Funders should focus their support on areas that influence other activities and pay particular attention to gaps.** For example, the systems map highlighted that school district

leadership plays a critical role in influencing teacher skills and knowledge, but very few funders are attending to district leadership.

- **Funders should create reinforcing, sustainable, activities in their grantmaking—activities that will continue after grant funding ends because incentives, relationships, policies, or knowledge have changed.**

In developing the systems map with state and local education leaders, the Common Core Funders Working Group coalesced around key areas of focus, several of which touch on the high-leverage opportunities outlined earlier in this guide. According to the working group, major areas of focus include:

- **Aligned instructional supports and materials.** Materials and curriculum are the tools that guide teachers' day-to-day instruction. If teachers don't have access to high-quality Common Core-aligned instructional materials and curriculum, they can't effectively teach to the standards and ensure that students are mastering more rigorous content.
- **Assessments.** The shift to common assessments is a critical step in fulfilling the promise of the Common Core. These assessments, to be administered online beginning in the 2014-15 school year, will yield real-time data on student knowledge and help teachers and parents better understand how kids compare with their peers in other states and communities. Most states have signed up to participate in the assessments, but many local school systems are struggling with readiness due to the cost of new technology, including devices and bandwidth.

- **Communications and stakeholder engagement.** Early implementation of the Common Core has been rocky in some states and local school systems. At the same time, political critics on the left and right are seeking to undo the new standards based on ideological arguments. This is creating a need for more strategic communications and public will building, as well as higher-touch engagement with key stakeholders including educators, policymakers, and reform advocates.
- **District leadership.** Strong leadership in local school systems is critical to successful implementation of the Common Core. District-level priorities include training and developing effective principals who then can support teachers and promote improved instruction and student learning. Inadequate district-level leadership can result in failed implementation.
- **Higher education engagement and alignment.** Colleges and universities have a vested interest in the Common Core. The new standards—with the emphasis on problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration—represent the culmination of what higher education leaders and employers say is needed to meet growing demands on the US workforce. If the standards are implemented with fidelity, they have the potential to reduce remediation rates and increase postsecondary success.
- **State leadership.** Governors, legislatures, state boards of education, and state departments of education are critical to driving successful implementation of the Common Core. Among other roles, state leaders can create policies and convene

key stakeholders—including teacher organizations, school systems, and vendors—to help ensure long-term sustainability of the standards. Alternatively, they can pass rules and laws that undermine higher expectations in the classroom.

- **Student supports.** The Common Core State Standards are more demanding than states' previous standards and therefore pose greater challenges for students. Local school systems and schools need to proactively develop supports to guide students through the academic transition in order to help those who are struggling and ensure that they don't fall behind. A strong system of supports can help inform and individualize instructional strategies.
- **Teacher and principal leadership.** This is the most important area of focus in public education's systems map. Research confirms the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the most important factor in improving student achievement. The quality of principals in the school buildings is critical, too. Whether or not students will rise to the Common Core's higher expectations depends on the ability of teachers and school leaders to adopt new instructional strategies that foster these skills.

Each of these areas contains a set of potential entry points and opportunities for funders. Regardless of their grantmaking priorities, funders can identify opportunities to ensure their grantmaking aligns with key elements of the Common Core implementation process.

CONCLUSION

Many funders believe that the Common Core State offer a window of opportunity to elevate America's education systems to a higher level of performance. Grantmakers that wish to seize this opportunity should consider ways to use all their available tools to help districts and states realize the promise of greater college and career readiness.

Given the enormity and complexity of the Common Core, funders may initially have a difficult time choosing the best entry points for getting involved. Grantmakers for Education's three-part series for funders on the standards is designed to help. This third guide illustrates several high-leverage opportunities for funders interested in supporting two leverage points in particular: quality implementation of the new standards, and building and maintaining public will. The second guide in the series profiled how place-based funders in small and large communities across the country are investing their resources to support local work. The first guide in the series introduced funders to the standards and explained their development and reach in K-12 schools.

Whatever path is chosen, funders that engage with the Common Core should be ready for a multi-year commitment. Supporting full implementation of the new standards is just the first step. Helping support the subsequent implementation of common assessments in the 2014-15 school year is equally important to ensure students are learning under the higher expectations.

Resources

ALIGNMENT & QUALITY RATING TOOLS

Student Achievement Partners, Achieve, and the Council of Chief State School Officers have compiled a toolkit for evaluating the alignment of materials with the Common Core State Standards. On the web: www.achievethecore.org/page/285/toolkit-content-list-page/

The **National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics** has developed its own Common Core materials analysis tool to help guide educators in selecting new materials. On the web: www.mathedleadership.org/ccss/materials.html

The **American Federation of Teachers** has created curriculum review tools for assessing alignment to the Common Core State Standards. On the web: www.aft.org/pdfs/tools4teachers/CCEvaluationTool_Math.pdf
www.aft.org/pdfs/tools4teachers/CCEvaluationTool_English.pdf

FREE EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

America Achieves has posted online videos and editable lesson plans on Common Core instructional practices, organized by grade level and subject area. On the web: commoncore.americaachieves.org

Student Achievement Partners' CCSS Instructional Practice Guide is a new instrument for assessing instructional practice (as opposed to the alignment of curriculum or lessons). On the web: www.achievethecore.org/leadership-tools-common-core/instructional-practice/

Engage New York has assembled a Common Core Toolkit that features curriculum modules, lesson videos, and other tools. On the web: www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-toolkit

The **National Education Association** has produced a series of Common Core-aligned lesson plans. On the web: pinterest.com/neatoday/common-core

The online resource, **Teaching Channel**, has created a vast library of teachers teaching lessons that embed Common Core instructional practices. On the web: www.teachingchannel.org

Advocacy and communications resources **Achieve** has compiled more than 150 resources for communicating and advocating around the Common Core and college- and career-ready expectations. On the web: www.futurereadyproject.org

The **Council of Great City Schools** has created an accessible set of grade-by-grade parent guides on the Common Core, in both English and Spanish. On the web: www.cgcs.org/Page/244

IMPLEMENTATION RESOURCES

The **Achievement Network** developed an implementation guide for school and district leaders that features case studies, rubrics and lessons drawn from work with hundreds of schools in underserved communities across seven states and the District of Columbia. On the web: achievementnetwork.squarespace.com/storage/FocusingOnTheHow_ANet_CommonCorePaper_2013.pdf

The **Council of Chief State School Officers** developed a list of tools and resources to support state leaders implementing Common Core State Standards. On the web: www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/Common_Core_State_Standards_Implementation_Tools_and_Resources.html

The **Hunt Institute and the Council of Chief State School Officers** commissioned a series of video vignettes to help diverse groups—educators, policymakers, parents—better understand the breadth and depth of the Common Core standards and how they will impact student learning. On the web: www.ccsso.org/Resources/Digital_Resources/Common_Core_Implementation_Video_Series.html

The **National Education Association** has released a Common Core State Standards Toolkit to provide educators with tools for implementing the standards. On the web: www.nea.org/assets/docs/14047-CommonCore_Toolkit_14.pdf

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