

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Funders' Guide to the Common Core State Standards

Announced in 2009 by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers and voluntarily adopted by most 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 (ELA) and literacy as well as mathematics.

The Common Core are designed to be “robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that young people need for success in college and careers,” according to the project’s leaders. States and local school systems are working overtime to implement and adjust to the higher expectations. Meanwhile, advocates and critics are engaged in spirited discourse over whether the standards can effectively drive improvement in K-12 education.

To help funders navigate these changes in school systems and consider how they might impact their grantmaking strategies, Grantmakers for Education produced a three-part series of guides. Together, these guides offer funders need-to-know information about the standards, an analysis of needs and challenges communities are facing, and ideas and advice for the highest-leverage opportunities to focus grantmaking resources and make a difference.

To help funders probe deeper—both individually and in partnership with other foundations in their region—Grantmakers for Education also has prepared a companion discussion guide for these three publications. The discussion guide suggests ways of tapping experts in communities, probing the issues and questions raised in these documents, and structuring conversations to surface local needs and opportunities.

GUIDE #1

Common Core State Standards

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

Designed as a primer, GFE’s first guide 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.

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. In drafting the new standards, the Common Core writers looked at what high-performing countries around the world expect of their students, and they consulted heavily with higher education and labor market researchers to understand these expectations and embed them in the Common Core.

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 2013, *Education Week* reports, legislators in 10 states introduced proposals to opt out but in the end only one state—Indiana—actually enacted a law to reverse course). Thus, in most states, Common Core implementation remains in full swing and many states have begun implementing the new

standards, at least at some grade levels, in the 2013–2014 school year.

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:

1. Educators generally support the higher expectations embedded in the standards and their shifts in teaching and learning, but they feel anxious about the enormity of the transition; and
2. 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.

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 in the sidebar, and identify what else

they need to be successful. The guide also flags these specific challenges for funders to pay attention to:

- **Common assessments**, linked to the new standards using new tests delivered via technology.
- **Educator evaluation**, which represents another major reform effort most states are implementing at the same time.
- **Professional development**, that ensures principals and teachers have the training and support they need to implement the Common Core with fidelity.
- **Communications and stakeholder engagement**, to build needed, sustained support among parents, policymakers and other stakeholders.
- **High-quality materials**, including the curriculum and tools teachers use in their classroom.
- **Student supports**, to provide students—especially those struggling already under older, lower standards—with building blocks for success.

According to the standards writers, the new expectations embedded in the Common Core will shift instruction in these ways to place students on a trajectory for college and career readiness:

In mathematics...

- Focus each grade level on a few key concepts (vs. providing a curriculum that is “a mile-wide and an inch-deep”)
- Pursue conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and real-world application (vs. focusing on just one of these)
- Link to major topics within grades and across grades (vs. covering scattered, isolated topics)

In English/language arts...

- Build knowledge through content rich nonfiction (vs. reading only fiction)
- Ensure that reading, writing and speaking are grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational (vs. writing based on opinion or personal experiences)
- Provide regular practice with complex text and academic language (vs. simply reading)

GUIDE #2

Changing the Classroom Context

What Do the Common Core State Standards Mean for Your Education Grantmaking?

Informed by advice and experiences from a dozen local funders, GFE's second guide suggests a variety of approaches for funders to respond constructively to the Common Core as schools implement these ambitious new standards.

According to the guide, even if funders choose not to invest directly in activities that advance the Common Core, they need to understand that the new standards will be absorbing the focus and capacity of educators and leaders moving through the challenging implementation process. Also, prospective grantees will increasingly reference them in funding requests. Moreover, funders should explore whether the Common Core affects their existing grantmaking strategies, and how they might use the standards as a rallying point to help accelerate pre-existing work and goals.

To develop the right grantmaking approach, the guide recommends funders consider these steps:

1. Survey The Landscape

As a starting point, funders need to take stock of how the Common Core is changing the classroom context in local school systems and states. Questions to ask include:

- What peak periods or pain points have school leaders identified in their implementation process, and how do they plan to respond?
- How should school leaders shift their existing resources to address

the demands of the Common Core? To what extent are local leaders aware of and utilizing implementation resources developed by other districts or states, including the increasing number of free materials developed by national organizations?

2. Assess Your Strategy

Reflecting on grantmaking goals and objectives, funders should think about how to acknowledge the Common Core in their education investments. Questions to ask include:

- How is Common Core implementation consuming capacity—leadership, resources and attention—inside local school systems and state agencies with which we work?
- What needs—technical assistance, research, leadership or communications—fit well with what we provide as funders?
- How can philanthropy leverage the “common” framework the standards provide by urging local school systems and states to develop and use higher-quality teaching materials and tools without reinventing the wheel?

3. Choose a Leverage Point

After surveying the landscape and assessing different strategies, funders can choose an approach that matches their priorities, leverages their strengths and interests, and addresses real gaps. Questions to ask include:

- Through the Common Core’s implementation, what big opportunities are emerging in areas of focus such as teacher preparation and development, school leadership, use of time in schools, and curriculum? How does that

align with our expertise, priorities and networks?

- In addition to grantmaking, are there other leadership roles we can play to focus attention on the Common Core? For example, can we provide leadership by bringing together leaders of local school systems, or building broader community awareness?
- How can funders work together to support improvements in schools throughout the region?

The guide profiles the efforts of three very different funders in three very different communities (the Chicago Community Trust, the J. F Maddox Foundation in New Mexico, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation in California) to work through these strategy steps and identify their own approach. “Participate” is the recommendation from one funder, who adds, “Philanthropy has a leadership role and you can influence how the Common Core takes shape.”

GUIDE #3

High Need, High Impact

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

.....
Drawing on funder-commissioned research about the complexities and interdependencies in public education that need attention in order for the Common Core to succeed, GFE’s third guide suggests high-leverage strategies for those funders that choose to get involved.

With the multitude of challenges and opportunities facing school systems and

schools as they implement ambitious Common Core standards, grantmakers can play multiple roles—conveners, advocates, advisors, even gadflies—in addition to their role as funders. Funders should 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 to ask district or charter school leaders to reflect on what went well—and what didn’t—during the first year of implementation. Funders also 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.

There are two particular opportunities for funders to productively impact Common Core implementation through a variety of approaches in their communities:

1. Support educators with quality implementation

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.

At the very least, funders can connect districts with the growing body of free resources that have been

developed by organizations such as America Achieves, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, Student Achievement Partners, the Teaching Channel, and others, all of which have online video libraries illustrating instructional shifts. Funders also can reinforce and help underwrite only those 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 (such as learning communities or peer networks). Don't overlook school leaders: building the capacity of teacher leaders, principals, and superintendents can produce more widespread change because of the critical role they play in influencing teachers' classroom practices.

Another 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, it 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 "Common Core-aligned"—but they might not be. By helping school systems make smart purchasing decisions funders can amplify their impact many times over.

2. Building and Maintaining Public Will

The new standards have come under 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. As a result, anti-Common Core campaigns are emerging in states across the country—some organic, but many highly coordinated and well-funded.

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 individually and 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."

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

Advocacy shouldn't stop with the new standards: Funders can play an essential role in helping state education policy leaders understand the value proposition of the new, common assessments most states will likely use. The reality is: Standards, no matter how good, aren't very helpful if they aren't well-measured.

Recognizing the unique possibilities provided by Common Core standards, committed foundations are planning, learning, and acting together in a concerted way over the next two years as the "Common Core Funders Working Group." A collaborative effort between the Education Funder Strategy Group, Growth Philanthropy Network and Grantmakers for Education, the Working Group seeks to leverage and organize the unique contributions of philanthropy—including resources, leadership, nimbleness, and independence—to support states and schools districts in successfully transitioning to the new Common Core standards.

The Working Group organizes funder interests and leadership on Common Core implementation issues at the national, state, and local levels. To learn more about getting involved—or simply to get added to the Working Group's regular e-newsletter summarizing reports, research, and development with the standards—contact Grantmakers for Education.

grantmakers^{for}education

Grantmakers for Education strengthens philanthropy to improve outcomes and expand opportunities for all learners. As a national network of more than 280 private and public grantmaking organizations supporting education from early learning through postsecondary education, GFE provides research, programs and resources to increase funders' ability to be strategic and capable in their education grantmaking. For more information or to learn about membership, please contact us.

information@edfunders.org
503.595.2100
www.edfunders.org

Grantmakers for Education thanks The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust for underwriting the preparation of this three-part series.

THE LEONA M. AND HARRY B.
HELMSLEY
CHARITABLE TRUST

DECEMBER 2013