

Common Core State Standards & the Transformation of Professional Development

Summer 2014

THIS DOCUMENT SUMMARIZES KEY FINDINGS FROM A SERIES:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite bruising legislative fights, flip-flops and sharply worded rhetoric coming at the standards from both sides of the political aisle over the past few months, nearly every state that adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) remains committed. Policymakers, educators and advocates in these states believe that the standards promote the deep content knowledge and versatile analytic capabilities that students need to compete in the global economy. And they acknowledge that teaching and learning must shift dramatically to better equip students with these skills and knowledge.

But if there is a weak link in the arguments for the Common Core — and we count Education First among the standards’ proponents — it’s that too few educators have received meaningful support as states and school districts make the transition to the new standards. Some states and school systems have prioritized support, creating robust learning opportunities and assembling tools for teachers to use in their classrooms; many other states and districts have responded more anemically, asking teachers to sort out for themselves how their practice needs to change to match the new expectations.

People are the most valuable asset of any enterprise, and that is especially true in school systems, as the magic of learning takes place in the deliberate interactions between teachers and their students. If the new standards are to support the improvements that we all want in teaching and learning, then we need to ensure school systems are helping teachers improve their practices. Delivering on the promise of the Common Core demands highly skilled teaching in many more classrooms.

Unfortunately, professional development has too often been seen as the “ugly stepchild” of the education reform movement — an expensive proposition with poor delivery and uneven results. But we think the standards’ clear focus on content and the instructional shifts that support delivery of that content present an unprecedented opportunity to rethink professional development.

We have a chance to replace what typically passes for professional development today with new models that enable educators to more effectively work together to improve their practice — and the profession. And a new approach to professional learning — one that supports continuous improvement, professional community and teacher agency — is exactly what most teachers say they want. The professional learning systems we identify and argue for in this brief move away from a top-down model where teachers work in isolation to a model emphasizing collaboration, coaching and peer accountability.



RESEARCH DESIGN: WHAT SUPPORT DO EDUCATORS NEED TO SUCCEED WITH THE COMMON CORE?

Recognizing the gaps in what the standards expect and what support educators are receiving, Education First set out to better understand the professional development that educators really need to help students meet these standards, and how to deliver these opportunities at scale and at depth.

We combed through the existing research on the impact of different forms of professional development. We examined states and school districts where leaders have thought deeply about how to engage teachers in using the standards and have made it a priority to support all teachers —not just some or to leave it to teachers to find their own way. And we talked to teacher leaders and experts who are working hand-in-hand with teachers to provide learning opportunities that help students meet the standards. (See [Appendix A](#) for a description of our methodology.)

What we found was both sobering and inspiring. The raised bar set by the Common Core requires many teachers and administrators to strengthen their content knowledge, choose or create aligned instructional materials and modify their teaching methods — and these changes need to happen on an unprecedented, massive scale. But it is happening in some places: Spurred on by what the new standards expect of students, teachers who are deeply engaged in rethinking their classroom practices and working with colleagues are reinventing what it means to be an effective teacher. As a principal in Sacramento put it, “In the 40 years I’ve been an educator, I’ve never seen changes this systemic, broad and deep.”

SUMMARY

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1

THE NEW ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In Brief #1 in the series, we describe and illustrate three elements that our research showed to be the backbone of any serious approach to engage and prepare teachers for success with the Common Core:

1. ADULT LEARNING SHOULD BE ONGOING AND ACTIVE AND INCLUDE BOTH COLLABORATION AND INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION.

Individual improvement involves activities such as coaching, mentoring and observations with meaningful feedback. Collective learning requires teachers to work together through professional learning communities or shared planning time to discuss what’s working, examine student work together and co-create and improve teaching materials.

2. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SHOULD FOCUS ON BUILDING GRADE-LEVEL CONTENT AND COMMON CORE-ALIGNED INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES.

Building content knowledge, based on the focus and progressions of the standards, is a centerpiece of effective professional development. Teachers need to understand the content they teach — and the concepts that support it — in much more depth so that they can help their students delve more deeply into that content. And new levels of understanding require different instructional practices: posing challenging questions, asking students to form arguments and defend positions taken, or asking them to explain the process and thinking used to solve a problem.

3. TEACHERS SHOULD GET SUPPORT IN IDENTIFYING AND USING HIGH-QUALITY, COMMON CORE-ALIGNED INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS.

The best professional learning often is connected explicitly to the materials that students use in the classroom. Educators need support identifying, curating and using high-quality, CCSS-aligned classroom materials — whether those are individual lessons, intact units of study or an entire curriculum. The current dearth of excellent materials means that teachers must be astute consumers and make smart choices; they need to find or build lessons and units from a wide variety of resources, rather than relying on a single textbook.



THREE VIGNETTES THAT SHOWCASE THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT HELPS TEACHERS SUCCEED

In [Brief #2](#) in this series, we spotlight how three of the new professional learning approaches that have impressed us the most have played out across the country. These vignettes demonstrate what’s possible when state and district leaders — and especially teachers — exert leadership and intentionally plan for supporting the Common Core. We also hope they demonstrate what it looks like when the essential elements of professional development we describe in [Brief #1](#) are put into practice.

Our vignettes include a partnership between the nonprofit Expeditionary Learning and the state and school districts in New York; Sacramento City’s efforts to collaborate with other districts and provide comprehensive supports to its teachers; and the bottom-up efforts of teachers in Nevada’s Washoe County to create their own learning communities. In each example, we see the components of replicable, scalable and effective professional development that should become a part of every school district in the country.

The vignettes in this series, along with examples from many other states and districts where leaders have stepped up, tell us we can make better choices through strong leadership. Our conversations with teachers tell us we must make other choices. And countless examples and great advice help us actually make these tough choices.



WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO TO ADVANCE HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT SCALE

It is clear what components are needed in a new professional learning system that supports teachers in helping students meet college and career readiness expectations. What’s trickier is exerting the will and leadership to put these sorts of changes in place.



Policymakers from state departments of education, school board members, district leaders and school leaders all have power to ensure that professional development supports teachers in succeeding with the Common Core in their classrooms and that all teachers and principals receive the support and push needed for follow-through. But where should they start? The list of necessary actions is obvious at some level, but these actions still aren't being taken — much less discussed — in many places. Instead, we hear about how these changes are too hard (“our state is too large and diverse to support all teachers”), too politically unpopular (“it’s the districts’ responsibility to improve professional development”) or too expensive (“we don’t have spare resources to spend”).

The vignettes in this series, along with examples from many other states and districts where leaders have stepped up, tell us we can make better choices through strong leadership. Our conversations with teachers tell us we must make other choices. And countless examples and great advice help us actually make these tough choices.

In [Brief #3](#) in this series, we recommend five sets of actions for policymakers and district leaders, along with citations to case studies and tools they can use to follow these steps. In a nutshell, here’s what we think policymakers and school districts must do to create more effective professional learning systems that support teachers and the Common Core:

1. CLARIFY WHERE YOUR DOLLARS ARE GOING AND PRIORITIZE HOW THEY CAN BE USED MOST EFFECTIVELY.

Most urban districts are spending a lot more than they realize on in-service days and training. They’re also finding that resources and funding for ongoing high-quality professional development — including, for example, expanding on-site coaching, allotting time for teachers to collaborate and paying for CCSS-aligned materials — requires making choices among competing priorities. Most administrators acknowledge the question is not whether a school or district has money to work with but whether these resources could be better used. Education leaders should find out where professional development dollars are going and reallocate funds as needed to the activities we describe in this brief.

2. FIND — OR CREATE — THE TIME NEEDED FOR HIGH-QUALITY, COMMON CORE-ALIGNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

The real cost of high-quality professional development comes from making time in the school day for teachers to study, improve their lessons plans and get feedback and support from peers — the linchpin to successfully helping teachers use the new standards well in classrooms, according to our research. School systems have found all sorts of ways to provide more time, from enabling school principals to set their schools’ schedules to providing additional funding through revisions in state funding formulas or access to federal or other grants.

3. LOOK FOR PROOF THAT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MATERIALS AND PROGRAMS ARE HIGH-QUALITY AND EFFECTIVE.

Evaluating the quality and effects of professional development is necessary to improve and channel investments into the professional learning activities and supports that make a difference. Systems for tracking and monitoring the quality of professional learning programs still vary widely across states and districts, and too few places establish clear criteria or guidelines for ensuring the highest quality professional development.

4. SHIFT LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES TO EMPHASIZE SCHOOLWIDE INSTRUCTIONAL CHANGE AND ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

Without strong and effective leaders who sponsor high-quality professional learning for all teachers in their schools and districts, pockets of excellence will remain isolated, hindering widespread improvement. To effectively support their teachers as they use the new standards, principals and district leaders need support themselves for planning, a deep understanding of the standards and instructional shifts, and training in recognizing new effective classroom practices.

5. ENSURE THAT ALL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS RECEIVE SUSTAINED, HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THAT HELPS THEM SUCCEED WITH THE COMMON CORE.

The sort of high-quality professional development we identify in our briefs is complex: It is ongoing and sustained, requires active engagement and focuses on particular content. Complex activities usually work well for a few but too often depth is sacrificed for breadth when programs scale up. With the Common Core standards, we need professional development that is both high-quality and widely scaled. Reaching scale, as the examples in this brief show, requires multiple methods and flexibility supported by common goals and, ideally, common instructional materials.

By raising and rethinking standards for student achievement these past few years, states and districts have opened the door to prepare all their students for college and careers and to ensure they can compete successfully with their international peers. Delivering on this promise will require hard work, commitment and persistence.

Now is not the time to throw up our hands in frustration, to complain that the standards and related tests are too challenging, or to tell educators we've changed our mind about the standards and want to try a new direction. If we want to truly support teachers during the transition to more ambitious learning standards, we need to give them what the best teachers give their students: consistent and clear direction, challenging work worth doing and the support they need to succeed.

The Common Core and the high-quality professional development the standards demand is our opportunity to do right by both students and teachers. Let's not waste it.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

To gather data for this series, we interviewed a diverse mix of educators, service providers and professional development experts around the country. They are listed below.

In fall 2013, to develop our initial ideas, we conducted informational interviews with these leaders and practitioners:

Sandra Alberti	<i>Director of State and District Partnerships and Professional Development</i>	Student Achievement Partners
Lisa Dickinson	<i>Assistant Director, Educational Issues</i>	American Federation of Teachers
Maddie Fennell	<i>Chair, Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching</i>	National Education Association; <i>Nebraska State Teacher of the Year 1989</i>
Andrea Foggy-Paxton	<i>Executive Vice President</i>	Reasoning Mind
Alice Gill	<i>Senior Associate Director, Educational Issues</i>	American Federation of Teachers
Darion Griffin	<i>Senior Associate Director, Educational Issues</i>	American Federation of Teachers
Aaron Grossman	<i>K–8 Specialist, Department of Curriculum and Instruction</i>	Washoe County School District (Nevada)
Gary McCormick	<i>Secondary Literacy and Curriculum Consultant</i>	Kenton County School District (Kentucky)
Linda Plattner	<i>Executive Director</i>	Illustrative Mathematics
Ellen Whitesides	<i>Consultant</i>	Illustrative Mathematics

Next, in spring 2014, we began to delve more deeply into professional development delivery and design and to determine whether there are differing perspectives on CCSS-aligned professional development. Based on recommendations and analysis from our earlier interviews and our own research, we set up a second round of interviews with leaders and partners at the following types of organizations:

A nonprofit professional development provider network: This group involved Expeditionary Learning and its partners in New York state — two New York school districts and the KIPP Foundation. Interviewees included the following individuals:

Victor Aluise	<i>Chief Teaching and Learning Labs Officer</i>	KIPP Foundation
Ron Berger	<i>Chief Program Officer</i>	Expeditionary Learning
Kate Gerson	<i>Senior Fellow Regents Research Fund</i>	New York State Department of Education
Scott Hartl	<i>Chief Executive Officer</i>	Expeditionary Learning
Tammy Mangus	<i>Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction</i>	Monticello Central School District (New York)
Shaun Nelms	<i>Deputy Superintendent</i>	Greece Central School District (New York)

APPENDIX A (CONTINUED)

A multi-district network: This group included the California Office to Reform Education (CORE) consortium in California and was complemented with a deeper look at Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). Interviewees included the following individuals:

Marinda Burton	<i>English/Language Arts Coach</i>	SCUSD
Charlotte Chadwick	<i>Principal</i>	SCUSD
Mikila Fetzer	<i>Math Coach</i>	SCUSD
Rick Miller	<i>Executive Director</i>	CORE
Olivine Roberts	<i>Chief Academic Officer</i>	SCUSD
Michelle Steagall	<i>Chief Academic Officer</i>	CORE

A charter management organization that uses online professional development as a regular part of its teacher development program: This group focused on Aspire Public Schools, a charter management organization that uses BloomBoard, an online professional development provider. Interviewees included the following individuals:

James Gallagher	<i>Director of Instruction</i>	Aspire Public Schools (CA)
Nate Monley	<i>Instructional Coach</i>	Aspire Public Schools (CA)

We also took a fresh look at data we had collected on four “early implementing” school districts for a report with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in early 2014, [*Common Core in the Districts: An Early Look at Early Implementers*](#). We focused particularly on the efforts of Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada, a single district with a grassroots district-level professional development model.

Finally, in assembling all of this material, sifting through the key findings and recommendations and drafting the briefs, we relied on the help and guidance of the individuals listed in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.