Foreword and Summary

BY AMBER M. NORTHERN AND MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

The last year has found critics and advocates of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) duking it out in the political arena. That a common set of high expectations for K–12 students would catalyze such fierce fisticuffs reminds us of both the ugliness and the beauty of democracy. Indeed, we at Fordham, ardent supporters of high standards for some seventeen years, have recently lurched out of the safe haven of think tankery and into the boxing ring. It is not a role that we asked for—or particularly relish—but, confident that the interests of America's children and its future are worth fighting for, we laced up our gloves.

Yet wherever one stands on the merits of the Common Core, one thing is certain. All the political posturing and mudslinging distract attention and energy from the crucial work of implementation. Like it or not, the Common Core State Standards are in place in forty-five states and the District of Columbia—and in many of those jurisdictions, educators are hard at work trying to operationalize them in their schools and classrooms.

How's it going so far? In a word: bumpy. A handful of studies—surveys of state education officials, mostly—paint a discouraging picture. The Center on Education Policy (CEP) reported a year ago that states were struggling to provide CCSS training of sufficient quality and quantity, with less than a majority of teachers in adopter states having participated in such professional development. Around the same time, ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) found that educators, facing a steep learning curve with the CCSS, were not achieving "deep mastery" of the standards themselves, which made it impossible to get their students to do so. Meanwhile, analysts at the University of Rochester surveyed CCSS math teachers and found that two-thirds of them were using textbooks that were in place prior to adoption of the new standards, thereby handicapping their own efforts to lift pupils to these elevated expectations. And Fordham's own recent study of reading in CCSS adopter states found that most elementary educators are still assigning texts based on students' present reading prowess as opposed to their grade level—a practice discouraged by the new standards.

Clearly, lots more monitoring and evaluating lies ahead. Yet one important inquiry that's been lacking—until now—is an in-depth examination of real educators in real districts as they earnestly attempt to put the CCSS into practice. So we set out to find those instructors and the districts in which they teach. Our goal was to peer into this void via an up-close look at district-level, school-level, and classroom-level implementation in a handful of jurisdictions. We sought out "early implementer" districts (the "early risers," if you will) that have moved with fair speed to implement the new academic standards—most of them well ahead of their own state timelines for doing so—in the hope that they would reveal lessons worth sharing with the broader field.

To conduct this study, we teamed up with Education First, a consulting firm founded by standards-reform veteran Jennifer Vranek, who a decade earlier had herself launched Achieve's American Diploma Project—which is often viewed as the precursor to the Common Core standards. Ed First is doing valuable work on sundry topics related to Common Core implementation and we were fortunate to nab two of its finest analysts, Katie Cristol and Brinnie Ramsey.

With plenty of feedback from additional experts, including some at Fordham, the team identified four early implementer districts that appeared worthy of scrutiny: Kenton County (KY), Metro Nashville (TN), Illinois's School District 54 (Schaumburg and vicinity), and Washoe County (Reno, NV).

In each district, the analysts probed five areas that are key to smooth implementation of any standards-based reform: communications, leadership, curricular materials, professional development, and assessment and accountability. They collected data in the summer and fall of 2013. What follows is a summary of what they learned, as well as our own main takeaways.

Key Findings

1. Teachers and principals are the primary faces and voices of the Common Core standards in their communities.

A parent's impressions of the new standards are shaped, in large part, by the teachers and building leaders in her child's school. If educators believe in the Common Core, they communicate that conviction to their students' families—and through them, to the wider community that employs them.

Further, smart districts strive to roll out information about the standards gradually and deliberately, in the context of improved student learning, and with enough advance notice that parents are not surprised by changes. Early and often, they explain how the Common Core differs from prior standards, what students should know and be able to do by year's end, and what new testing items will look like.

Helped by public trust of educators and strategic communications, such districts can minimize politics and misinformation. They understand that if parents (and the wider community) have accurate knowledge about the Common Core, rumors and misinformation will have less influence. And that's largely how it has played out.

Still, major public opinion challenges lie ahead for these districts (as well as for states and the nation). The implementation of rigorous Common Core-aligned assessments could bring a backlash, particularly if and when parents see test scores plummet. In other words, we're still waiting for the—ahem—scores to hit the fan.

2. Implementation gains traction when district and school leaders lock onto the Common Core standards as the linchpin of instruction, professional learning, and accountability in their buildings.

That a school's principal serves as a strong instructional leader is sound practice under any set of standards. Of course, building leaders need not shoulder the responsibility of instructional leadership alone; it can be shared with master teachers, instructional coaches, or other experts.

Yet districts that are serious about high-quality Common Core implementation select, evaluate, and hold principals accountable based on their skills in instruction. Prior to the arrival of the Common Core, two of our four profiled districts already viewed such expertise as central to their hiring and promotion decisions. (For instance, two deputy superintendents had been promoted from prior roles in curriculum and instruction.) Likewise, principals who failed to demonstrate this sort of leadership were let go.

As with teacher professional development (more below), principal training in these districts is also focused on instruction—not administrative issues. (Those are dealt with in other ways on other days.) As a result, principals speak in compelling detail about their understanding of the new standards and can give examples of what Common Core-aligned instruction looks like in their buildings. Even more important, they can identify areas where teachers are struggling to make the instructional shifts (see Appendix B) that the Common Core demands.

That doesn't mean it's easy. Principals in the two larger districts profiled here say it is a struggle to give top billing to the Common Core given their other duties and scarce resources. What's more, teachers worry that uninformed leaders will fail to understand the primary tenet of the Common Core: that fewer standards, covered more deliberately, translate into deeper and better learning. Furthermore, teachers fret, will they be evaluated unfairly if their own principals don't appreciate the instructional shifts called for by the Common Core?

3. In the absence of externally vetted, high-quality Common Core materials, districts are striving—with mixed success—to devise their own.

Curriculum publishers were suspiciously quick to proclaim that what they are selling is aligned with the Common Core—and districts are rightly wary of such claims. It takes time to develop and vet high-quality textbook series and other curriculum. All four districts expressed caution about spending limited dollars on materials that were not truly aligned to the Common Core and are delaying at least some of their purchases until they see products that are.

For now, they have approached curriculum development in patchwork fashion. Even districts with the most extensively redesigned curricula have kept at least some of their previous instructional materials, with teachers pulling out isolated lessons, problem sets, assessment items, and so on, as they fit with the new standards. This is understandable; jettisoning all prior materials is expensive, time-consuming, and can make teachers uneasy. (And did we mention that there's a dearth of high-quality, expertly vetted, complete Common Core-aligned curricula?!) Yet creation of homegrown materials carries the same uncertainty as vendor-developed materials: Are they truly aligned? Are they any good? Will they produce the desired results in students?

Here we must flash a warning light, as several districts in this study are using materials that appear to be at odds with the philosophical underpinnings and instructional shifts at the heart of the Common Core. Indeed, many of the math curricula that pre-date CCSS are "spiraling": that is, mathematics concepts are introduced and revisited *each year*. By contrast, the Common Core requires a "major work" focus in each grade, with accompanying concepts to be introduced and taught to mastery in just a few grade levels. It's hard to imagine how one could reconcile such fundamental differences.

Still, for all the risks and uncertainties, homegrown stuff fosters buy-in and ownership. In fact, teachers in these districts support a district-wide, common curriculum—*precisely because* they've had a hand in creating, judging, and/or improving it. Engaged in such activities, they welcome the materials as an asset, rather than resist them as a ploy to undermine their autonomy or professionalism.

4. The scramble to deliver quality CCSS-aligned professional development to all who need it is both as crucial and (so far) as patchy as the quest for suitable instructional materials.

It's standard practice—almost boring—to sound the alarm for better professional development, but we're obligated to say it yet again. Think of professional development as a car that not only needs major body work (updated delivery methods, repurposing of resources) but a new engine, too (novel content delivered to teachers and administrators).

But where do teachers go to glean new expertise relative to the Common Core? Our four districts rely on familiar delivery mechanisms—instructional coaches and master teachers—who are themselves trained via a variety of methods. As early implementers, these educators have gone both to the "source" of the standards *and* used other proxies for quality and alignment: They've worked directly with and learned from the standards' authors themselves and/or used tools created by them (e.g., the Publishers' Criteria developed by Student Achievement Partners and several other groups). They've checked their understanding against instruments developed by field experts and other states (e.g., EQuIP rubric). And they've scrutinized their interpretations of the standards by consistently returning to them as the basis for professional development content.

Districts have put considerable thought and energy into cultivating Common Core expertise—and this report reviews their victories as well as their ongoing struggles, some of which are inherent in their chosen delivery systems. For instance, major inconsistencies exist in the quality of instructional coaching across buildings. Teachers and principals report that the stronger specialists help them analyze lesson plans and student work in the context of the new standards, while the weaker ones add little value at best and misinformation at worst.

Sufficient time for teacher reflection and collaboration has always been good school practice, but it takes on particular salience for the Common Core. When districts and schools provide such opportunities, teachers can focus on the standards themselves, how lessons support them, and whether student work shows mastery of them. By contrast, most previous state standards were too lengthy and convoluted to use as the basis for weekly planning and reflection. One secondary English teacher explained, "When I started teaching, we had two different documents: the state standards and what we actually tested. Now there's an app on my phone with the 10 [ELA Anchor] standards for speaking, listening, and reading."

5. **The lack of aligned assessments will make effective implementation of the Common Core difficult for another year.**

Most states and districts are in the unenviable position of having to implement new standards without the summative assessments in place that will measure student mastery. But they've had to make do, to the chagrin of most educators, who—at least in these early implementer districts—believe that their current state tests are poor measures of student

understanding relative to the new standards and may even detract from proper implementation. (According to CEP, at least twenty-seven states have "embedded" CCSS items in their existing tests.)

This void creates two problems. First, misaligned assessments undermine the critical link between what is reported in accountability systems (test score and teacher evaluation data) and what districts purport to value (Common Core-aligned instruction, student success with the new standards). Second, without Common Core-aligned summative data, districts don't know whether their implementation strategies are effective on a school- and district-wide scale.

Such misalignment understandably worries teachers, both on their pupils' behalf and in connection with the accountability systems that envelop them. In Metro Nashville, for instance, teacher performance data has been tied to student value-added scores on the state test (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, aka TCAP) and used in the overhauled teacher evaluation system, as well as on school and district report cards. Leaders in the district have been asking teachers to trust that good Common Core instruction will improve performance even on extant, non-aligned tests, but educators remain anxious so long as student growth on the TCAP is a part of their evaluation.

What do we take away from these findings? Here are four lessons for district leaders.

First, leave the politics to others. Discuss the merits (and drawbacks) of the Common Core as they relate to academic content, instruction, and assessment. Help parents understand the changes inherent in the CCSS and prepare them for the potentially upsetting test results to come.

Second, allow teachers to have a hand in developing and improving the shared materials they'll use in classrooms. At minimum, this enhances ownership and buy-in of the new standards.

That said, lesson three is to beware of recycling old materials (e.g., via a Balanced Literacy approach or a text like *Everyday Mathematics*) when they don't share the fundamental precepts of the Common Core. Square pegs simply don't belong in round holes.

Finally, take a serious look at the quality of your own implementation efforts. Educators spend a lot of time talking about the importance of professional learning communities, instructional coaches, reviews of student work, and so on. To those of us who have been in education for any length of time, it begins to sound like Charlie Brown's teacher. So ask yourself: Is my district engaging in business as usual? Or is it using familiar mechanisms and strategies in ways that truly bring these rigorous new benchmarks to life?

* * * * * * * * * * *

Right now, districts are in the near-impossible situation of operationalizing new standards before high-quality curriculum and tests aligned to them are finished. Until we have those in place, implementation will remain confused and patchy. Yet time is passing and the new tests and truly aligned textbooks are coming. Think of it this way: we're still in spring training, a time when focusing on the fundamentals, teamwork, and steady improvement is more important than the score. But districts ought not dawdle: they are just a year away from the big game. Batter up!

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible through the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Louis Calder Foundation, and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

Many thanks to Katie Cristol and Brinnie Ramsey at Education First, who conducted the research and co-authored this report. We appreciate their hard work, attention to detail, and willingness to address our myriad questions. Also at Ed First, we are grateful for the contributions of a number of colleagues: Jennifer Vranek for her work as chief advisor for the report, Lisa Towne for her leadership in the research design of the pilot and full study, and Marc Frazer for his thought partnership in organizing our findings. We are indebted to the educators and administrators–and in particular, the site leads–in District 54, Kenton County, Metro Nashville, and Washoe County. We thank them for their time, thoughtful reflection, and willingness to speak candidly about their experiences in implementing this ambitious endeavor called the Common Core.

On Fordham's side, we extend thanks to Chester E. Finn, Jr., who provided insightful feedback and valuable advice during the report's drafting process; Victoria Sears, who offered feedback on drafts and oversaw production; Alyssa Schwenk, who kept funders abreast of findings and progress; and Michelle Gininger and Joe Portnoy, who managed dissemination. Kathleen Porter-Magee, our Bernard Lee Schwartz Fellow, helped get the project underway and commented on initial drafts.

We also thank Shannon Last, who served as copy editor; Samuel Whitehead, who created the report's cover; and Edward Alton, who designed its layout.