COMMON CORE
FUNDERS WORKING GROUP

Funding the Common Core State Standards:
What Have We Learned the Last Three Years?

Introduction

The Common Core State Standards—finalized in 2009 and adopted by 46 states and D.C.—define a 21st century vision for what young people need for success in college and careers in mathematics and English language arts. As such, their authors and many advocates believe the standards present an unprecedented opportunity to elevate the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning in America's schools—and to tackle persistent problems in new ways.

With their emphasis on problem-solving, critical thinking and writing, the Common Core standards can usher sweeping changes in schools, districts and states. And the transition to these higher expectations has shone a new light on many problems (such as allocation of resources towards ineffective professional development activities, and lack of scrutiny in the adoption of quality teaching materials) that have hampered effective teaching and world-class education in U.S. schools. Education funders interested in supporting the success of Common Core standards have therefore been pushed to consider solutions to deeper challenges and to consider more powerful ways of exerting influence and encouraging change. As one funder observed, *"Philanthropy had a huge role in Common Core implementation; Common Core implementation has had a huge role in philanthropy."*

Among the philanthropic partnerships emerging in recent years to support the standards and confront the challenges is the Common Core Funders Working Group. Created in Fall 2012 by Educator Funder Strategy Group, Grantmakers for Education and Growth Philanthropy Network, the Common Core Funders Working Group has sought to leverage and organize the unique contributions of philanthropy—including resources, leadership, nimbleness and independence—to support students, schools, districts and states in successfully achieving the Common Core State Standards. Funders established the Working Group as a three-year effort to inform and support learning in the sector as schools began implementing the standards and new assessments. During these early, nascent years of the standards, the Working Group sought to create broader understanding and commitment among both national and local funders about system needs about needs and opportunities.

As that planned three-year time horizon for the learning agenda comes to a close, members of the Working Group are recommitting to their own plans for action in supporting the Common Core. Lessons learned from the Working Group's efforts can inform the *next* phase of both individual funder action and collaborative grantmaking activities:

- What has been learned about effective education philanthropy from supporting implementation of the Common Core?
- What could funders do differently to support the standards going forward, given the experience of the past few years?
- What has the field learned (or re-learned) about the challenges and approaches to systems change in education?

To facilitate this reflection, Working Group leaders commissioned this capstone paper to capture insights from participants in various Working Group activities, including national and regional funders and field leaders in state policy, district implementation, professional development and teacher associations (see list of contributors, page 10). We asked questions about the turning points in Common Core implementation, about funder roles and influence and about what they believed philanthropy should take away from its support efforts to date. This brief report summarizes what we found.

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Common Core Funders Working Group: Goals and Major Emphases
2012 to 2015

The Common Core Working Group was established in Fall 2012 to work toward these goals over three years:

- Match philanthropic resources with emerging/pressing needs and gaps in the field as states and districts implement the Common Core standards and aligned assessments.

- Provide information to help individual funders strengthen their own grantmaking strategies and choices as they work with specific states, districts, schools and critical stakeholders on the unique challenges and changes required as part of the shift to Common Core standards.

- Encourage coordinated grantmaking among funders with similar interests and strategies.

- Develop opportunities for funders of all different levels—national, state and local—to advance Common Core implementation.

As a starting point to better understand the needs of the field, what factors would influence the success of the Common Core, and where philanthropy might best help, the Working Group collaborated with Peter Senge and his colleagues at the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management—plus practitioners and leaders in the sector—in 2012 and 2013 to develop an implementation "systems map."

From the systems map, Working Group members identified seven potential "high leverage areas." These represented areas and actors with greatest potential to influence the success of the new standards in improving teaching and learning—and where there was real risk for failure. Collaborating with practitioners, the Working Group also identified a series of exemplar grants and strategies that funders could consider in each area.

The system map—both the exercise of creating it, and the resulting tool itself—was intended to align funders' understanding about the needs of the field and to help them jointly identify areas of greatest vulnerability. For example, the mapping efforts pointed to the need for investments in teaching materials and teacher professional development—two leverage points that became the focus for the Working Group's second year efforts.

Building on what the system map suggested, the Working Group emphasized these knowledge-sharing activities in subsequent years:
- In year two, the group focused on proactively sharing lessons learned and emerging research with national funders engaged with the Working Group (through EFSG meetings and a new e-newsletter) and working within "issue teams" to shine a spotlight on two critical implementation areas needing funder attention.
- In year three, the group focused on growing its network and reach to better serve and connect with smaller, regional foundations through outside-of-the-Beltway programming.

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What Has Philanthropy Learned So Far?

An overarching theme from funders about their experiences and reflections from supporting the Common Core implementation: Supporting systems change requires balancing action and reflection, urgency and patience. The lessons described on the following pages highlight this tension. In the arena of communications and advocacy, funders agree they ought to have moved more quickly and aggressively; in the policy arena, some respondents wonder if philanthropy pushed the field to move *too* quickly when teachers, in particular, needed time to adapt to the new learning expectations.

Collaboration is powerful, but not always possible.

The depth of what the standards demand of students, and the breadth of what needs to change in schools for teachers and students to succeed with the standards, is audacious. And, over the past three years, it has spurred funders to work together in new ways. Many funders quickly saw that successfully implementing new standards and more complex tests in nearly every state and in thousands of districts with huge variances in capacity and preparation for the undertaking was an unprecedented task. Findings ways of successfully attending to the corresponding change management challenges (why the pain was worth the gain) further complicated the situation.

Interviewees noted that, unlike many previous education initiatives where funders had existing practices and points of view, the implications of what the Common Core expected forced everyone to learn together. Even those with experience supporting policies or practices that advanced previous state academic standards had something new to learn about scale and the standards' "instructional shifts." The response of many funders changed, as one described, *"from 'I have the answers' to 'no one has the answers'—and that made us more open to collaborative investments and open to learning."*

Funders and observers point to partnerships and pooled funding on communications, higher-quality state assessments and standards-aligned instructional materials as evidence and effect of this change in philanthropic mindset and practice. They report that the resulting collaborations have helped implementation of the standards tremendously to date, and note that these collaborations[1] can lay the groundwork for future opportunities by reminding funders of their potential influence when they work collectively.

Indeed, field leaders and funders themselves urged the field to resist the pull to go back to their usual, more individual practices. As one leader compellingly argued:

> *"I hope we've learned that there is incredible power in collaborating with one another instead of going to tiny, individual corners of gaps. Rowing in the same direction together and understanding the goals have given foundations a huge voice in policy and reform that they wouldn't have had before. That's a huge lesson—it's a really different way of thinking."*

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[1] In addition to the Common Core Funders Working Group, notable collaborations to support the Common Core have included the communications- and advocacy-focused Collaborative for Student Success, the High Quality Assessment Project and its work to support states' transitions to new, Common Core-aligned tests, and the Core to College Network of states that focused early on addressing the misalignment between K-12 and postsecondary standards. In addition to these national efforts, funders have also worked together in important regional collaborations, such as the California Common Core Funders Collaborative and the Illinois Donors Forum Common Core working group.

At the same time, these partnerships to support the Common Core also signal the limits of collaboration. Some interviewees pointed out that funders have generally found it easier to collaborate on more abstract ideas behind the standards—for example, co-signing on common messages of "college readiness" and "high expectations" for all student—or on more straightforward needs such as better-quality materials, rather than complex or controversial issues.

Many observed that one example of the limits to funder collaboration on Common Core-related issues has been in the area of system and educator accountability. Genuine disagreement about the timeline for assessments and accountability among funders has meant less cohesion and success on these issues. As one field leader observed, "*Because there is real division within the education reform community and across funders [on the timelines and roles for new assessments and new accountability requirements], there hasn't been the same influence at brokering policy compromises.*"

Recognizing this tension, and its consequences, isn't to wish it away; respectful differences of opinion among funders on the appropriate timelines and sequencing of difficult changes persist, just as they do in the broader education sector. But this reality is a reminder that collaboration isn't always possible.

An open question posed by the funders in this research is how much of a shared long-term agenda is required to effectively collaborate. Funders must agree on the short-term objectives for their collaboratives, of course, but must they also agree on the longer-term or contextual objectives for the *outcomes* of their collaboratives? For example, if funders agree on what a high-quality assessment looks like and how it ought to be implemented, but disagree on how data from those assessments ought to be used and the accountability consequences to which it should be tied, is there still space for productive collaboration?

Similarly, challenges persist in genuine partnership between national and local funders. The Working Group's efforts to spread its research to local funders and to engage them in programs met with mixed success, as the field lacks strong infrastructure for engaging local partners in national learning networks. Differences in what national and local funders are interested in supporting, how they choose grantees and how they structure collaborations also can be an obstacle to partnership and communication.

Collectively, interviewees offered insights about the circumstances or conditions under which funder collaboration has seemed to work best, including:
- Urgency and "clear and present dangers" vs. long-term needs where progress is hard to measure;
- A clear, well-established and mutual understanding of the issue and the needs of the field (such as the one the Working Group's systems map sought to establish);
- Agreement on what success look likes, what quality looks like, and what the ideal outcome will look like;
- Willingness to cede authority to someone else to act—decisively and quickly—on their behalf;
- A strong project manager (drawing on external support where necessary) to ensure collaboration yields action and not merely discussion.

Funders are uniquely positioned to provide communications support on difficult systems change; effectively doing so requires coordination and early action on advocacy.

One of the clearest takeaways for funders considering future reforms is that advocacy and public championship for change are among philanthropy's most needed and critical roles. Particularly as

implementation of aspirational ideas and major changes become difficult, and politicians and system leaders find themselves under pressure to reverse course on reform or second-guess decisions made, "*foundations have to be the ones that have the backbone to stay the course,*" according to one field leader. Funders are uniquely positioned to provide this background, given their non-partisan status, general insulation from public influence, and immediate demands of constituencies and ability to take a more objective, longer view.

In the case of the Common Core, most interviewees noted that funders offered critical and influential leadership in ensuring more strategic, intentional national communications about the goals, impact and support for the standards.

Field leaders and funders themselves pointed to the ultimate success of the Collaborative for Student Success (a funder collaborative that serves as a sort of "war room" in providing coordinated, proactive and strategic communications and advocacy in support of the Common Core) as an example of the influence of coordinated funder support. Others pointed to funders' thought leadership, or what one funder described as influence on "*the high-level conversation about what's possible and new learning environments for students,*" in helping push back against opposition and encouraging stakeholders to keep moving forward.

There was also near-unanimity, however, that these communications efforts took much too long to get started. There were a number of reasons for this delay, including internal debate among funders and lack of clarity about the right position for philanthropy. One national funder recounted:

> "*Education advocacy organizations kept saying 'we got it.' It took a lot of work to realize: The opposition is not going away and collectively we don't 'got it.' We realized we had to do business differently. Funders danced around and came through much closer to each other. Partnerships such as the High Quality Assessment Project, Collaborative for Student Success and Common Core Funders Working Group all came together. But it was a long gestation period!*"

This delay was felt acutely on the "front lines" of implementation; one state policy leader described how "*The best example [of philanthropy's lack of agility] was that the Collaborative for Student Success had a lot of money going in early on but not a lot going out. What funders could/should do together took forever to figure out… especially when forces were actively organizing in opposition.*" Another field leader noted, "*The internal debate about what should we do about communications, policy and advocacy really delayed when it was needed,*" adding that the delay also ended up costing funders more (in dollars) than investing in advocacy early on.

Ultimately, one lesson from funder efforts to support Common Core implementation is that major changes sometimes themselves requires new institutions and new arrangements to bring new approaches and new energy to the work. This may be especially true for communications. Because philanthropy (and other champions for the Common Core) generally saw the case for college- and career-ready standards as self-evident, the field was slow to realize that the Common Core wouldn't "sell itself." As one state policy expert reflected, "*When pushback began, it was clear no one was in charge.*" Funders learned through this process that the state chiefs, higher education presidents, school district superintendents and assessment consortia staff actually doing the work of implementation weren't also able to communicate about it well, and they stepped in to fill this gap.

Funders also reflected that more deliberate, early purposeful engagement of parents and teachers—and not just their national associations—may have better prepared the field to respond to and withstand

political pressures. National funders have regularly looked to support national-level nonprofits to lead these sorts of communications efforts, but they ought to also consider ways of supporting more local, community-based organizations who have strong and trusted parent relationships and networks, across the political spectrum.

To support adaptive challenges in education, philanthropy must also evolve its own practices.

Harvard University business professor Ron Heifetz has distinguished "adaptive challenges"—complex changes that require new learning in order to succeed—from "technical challenges," which can be more readily and straight-forwardly resolved by applying existing knowledge.

Helping educators and students succeed with the Common Core is decidedly an adaptive challenge, and a number of interviewees reflected positively on those instances where funders were themselves willing to evolve and change their practice, modeling the adaptive changes they sought in school systems. As an example, one funder observed that the Common Core pushed funders to think more flexibly about grant outcomes and monitoring: "*It's no longer about just doing a grant agreement with a set of outcomes and monitoring the outcome. Instead, we're funding 'learning goals' like moving the needle of teacher self-perception of efficacy, or moving the needle of students' ability to persevere in solving a math problem.*" This kind of flexibility and shifts in practice are significant, given philanthropy's traditional, more technocratic approaches to supporting grantees and seeking to solve problems. Confronting more "seismic" changes in systems and organizations and supporting change management don't fit easily into the skillset of many foundations.

When asked about turning points in the implementation of the standards, one observer pointed to the humility demonstrated by one of the biggest funder champions of both the Common Core and new teacher evaluation systems: *"Vicki Phillips' statement on behalf of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation encouraging states to slow down teacher evaluation was admirable and a big deal given the amount of resources the foundation had invested in this issue. Publically announcing changes in course is part of what philanthropy should be doing about missteps and course corrections."*

Published in summer 2014, the open letter encouraged states to delay use of assessments results in high-stakes teacher evaluation or student promotion, saying "the standards need time to work." More efforts like that one can remind the field that good philanthropy makes bets with an understanding that the landscape will evolve and that not every obstacle or opportunity can be seen at the beginning.

Another promising funder practice the Common Core demanded: Fresh investments in elevating teacher voices in policy and practice debates and encouraging greater teacher-leadership. Interviewees both inside and outside philanthropy emphasized that funders should sustain their efforts to hear from and place teachers at the center of strategies for the CCSS *and* future reforms. At the same time, however, several noted that many funder practices both small (for example, focusing on digital instead of printed materials; or, supporting one- and two-day workshops that give teachers exposure but not deep and sustained experience with the standards) and great (for example, failing to work more successfully with union leaders to reach teachers at the outset) will need to evolve to truly support teacher leadership in the future.

Still, outside of philanthropy, some field experts wondered whether funders could have worked harder to ensure that the same spirit of "trying and failing" was reflected in the policies for which they advocated and the supports they pushed systems to provide. As one national leader reflected, *"We*

weren't true to the spirit of what we know to be true about allowing people to try and stumble on something new. To the extent that funders could have raised the caution and elevated the need to stage things and go more slowly, that may have changed things." And another field expert noted, "*We've given short shrift to just how hard it is to do [the demanding teaching required by the Common Core] at scale and the fact that we don't have the systems in place (for example, teacher preparation or professional development) to support it.*"

A related consideration is the extent to which funders considered not just the needs and opportunities the new standards presented, but the risks (and risk mitigation strategies) that could undermine implementation. Reflecting on the first three years of implementation, funders noted that conversations about risks were either too few or too surface-level.

What Should be Next for Supporting the Common Core?

Although funders and field leaders offered up sometimes differing takeaways about the last three years of Common Core implementation, they were unanimous on this point: Philanthropy must continue to invest in the success of the standards and help follow through on the promise of more students being prepared for college and careers. Indeed, funder support is now more critical than ever. One state policy leader's words stand in for many others: "*We need all hands on deck for the next two to three years. Don't rip up this effort by its short roots and discard it.*"

Interviewees highlighted a number of areas for continued funder focus, including those areas where philanthropy has already made some interim gains, such as beginning to influence the **quality of teaching materials and textbooks**, and for helping state leaders commit to and follow through on **higher-quality assessments aligned to the standards**.

Nearly all celebrated funders' achievements to date in supporting the development of new teaching tools and in generating stronger state and local buy-in for quality, aligned instructional materials and assessments. In fact, in the states and districts that are national leaders for effective implementation, philanthropic investments have supported the teaching coaches, professional learning communities, implementation guides, formative assessments, teaching tools and resource re-allocations that have been so essential to the success. As one national funder noted, *"[Philanthropy needs to] help create* more *high quality materials and to keep the assessments moving forward. This is still the right work.*"

As major achievements so far, funders and observations pointed to the promising early start that funder partnerships provided to efforts such as Ed Reports and other quality-control tools such as the EQuIP (Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products) rubric and Student Achievement Partners' Publishers' Criteria. But all were quick to point out that these achievements are just the first step down a long, sustained path to ensuring the adoption and use of best quality materials.

In particular, the next stage of funder investment in better teaching materials and assessments may be well served to consider the context in which those materials will be used. As one field leader explained, *"It's easier to invest in the materials and quality assessment tools than it is to invest in what it takes to make sense of those tools. If our foundation could do it all over again, we'd focus less on the existence of resources than on ensuring that teachers had the time and support in applying and using those resources."* Efforts to more strongly link investments in new tools and materials to efforts that improve teacher learning (described in more detail below) may be a particularly high-value strategy worth considering.

In addition to urging continued attention to influencing the marketplace to create stronger instructional tools, interviewees recommended that the highest-leverage areas for funders moving forward will be broader advocacy and communications and stronger teacher development efforts.

The need for **communications and public engagement** remains high because of the sheer scope of the changes the Common Core requires combined with the increasingly vocal and aggressive opposition to the standards for a variety of reasons (from worries about federal influence in schools, to concerns about too much testing, to old-fashioned political brinkmanship).

The vision and message of "college and career readiness," compelling as it may have been at the start, is slowly being swamped by what one national funder described as "*all the ways in which we (don't) provide time/ opportunity/ structure for teachers to improve their practice and to be engaged and have the tools they need*." That funder continued, "*The Common Core hasn't caused these issues, but it's exposed what was already there.*" At the same time, the opposition to the standards has become more opportunistic and political.

How can funders seek to evolve their communications support of the Common Core, given this difficult context? To stay the course, multiple observers called on funders to "find and tell the stories" from districts and schools where the standards have been implemented well, and the positive impact on students and educators is demonstrably clear. Specifically, one leader called on funders to "*highlight the good stories, where Common Core has been working well. Bring in educators… help elevate the learning at the classroom and school level, and talk about the involvement of parents*."

The need is greater than just good messages or talking points; spotlighting educators and systems that are getting Common Core implementation right helps address the complicated reality with appropriately nuanced narratives. This strategy can also play to one of philanthropy's identified strengths in implementation to date: Creating a common understanding and definition of "what good looks like" with respect to learning environments for students.

Teacher development remains a similarly difficult and complex challenge for the same, systemic reasons (as noted above, the challenges teachers face with the Common Core unveil all the ways in which current systems fail to provide the time, opportunity and structure for teachers to improve their practice). Yet many interviewees urged philanthropy to increase efforts in this area, as the standards can't help student succeed if teachers aren't passionate and well-skilled at helping students meet these new expectations. With the first round of testing against the standards now completed in most states, the current moment presents an opportunity for funders, in the words of one field leader, "*to step back, get aligned on a common agenda [for teacher development] and reinvest*."

What might drive that common agenda? Ideas and priorities proposed included:

- Improved pre- and in-service teacher training in content pedagogy, ensuring teachers both understand and are able to teach what the standards expect at each grade level;
- Spotlighting and incentivizing stronger district practices for reallocating resources in ways that support sustained professional learning (such as by providing time for teachers to collaborate and learn and to work with coaches and mentors on their practice); and
- Continuing to work through unions to enable teachers to name and advocate for their greatest needs.

Conclusion

The challenges and needs posed by the Common Core standards remain. Funder support—for better teaching materials and better tests, for communications and advocacy, for teacher development—will still be critical and even decisive in the years ahead.

Working individually and jointly, philanthropy has influenced the adoption and implementation of the new standards. But the need for aggressive and well-organized advocacy and communications; the simultaneous potential and limitations of funder collaboration; the lessons about continuous improvement; and remaining questions about philanthropy's role in systems change all remain pressing needs for continued support and future undertakings.

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Interviewees and Contributors

Education First conducted this assessment and prepared this report. Together with the Common Core Funders Working Group, we thank the following participants in this research for their time and thoughtful reflections:

- Jim Applegate, Illinois Board of Higher Education (*formerly Lumina Foundation*)
- Barbara Chow, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
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