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How Funder Collaborations Flourish: Lessons from the Common Core Standards

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATION FUNDERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

APRIL 2016

On an issue as complicated as implementation of the Common Core State Standards, how can funders decide whether to collaborate—and how to do so successfully?

Education First developed this **guide to help funders create more effective collaborations**, focusing on how they can work together to advance implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or other significant, system-wide changes to education systems.

Funders can use the guide to reflect on their priorities, learn how to apply a **decision-making matrix** to shape collaborations with others and review brief case studies with lessons from our work supporting funder collaboratives.

Importantly, our ideas for how funder collaborations can support the standards moving forward can apply in any state committed to college- and career-ready expectations, including those states that have rebranded or added to the CCSS.

We appreciate the encouragement and support the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided to develop this guide.

This executive summary includes highlights from Education First's guide on funder collaboration. For the complete guide, <u>click here</u>.

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The Common Core State Standards aim to help prepare all students for college and careers.

Finalized in 2009, the standards cover English language arts/literacy and mathematics in grades K-12.

As of 2016, 42 states, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories and the Department of Defense Education Activity have voluntarily adopted and are using these standards.[1]

What do the standards aim to achieve?

| **Prepare all students** for credit-bearing introductory courses in two- or four-year colleges, and success in the workforce | **Enable "deeper learning"** through problem-solving, critical thinking, and extensive reading and writing | **Create opportunities for collaboration and resource-sharing** among educators across the country |

Common Core standards have by design created a cascading series of changes in K-12 education that require attention.

Educators, policymakers and funders have identified some of the areas below as the **most critical to address for the long-term success of the standards**:

Professional development and ongoing support for educators and principals as they implement the CCSS in their schools

High-quality instructional materials aligned to the CCSS available to all educators

New statewide accountability systems and high-quality assessments to measure student progress against the CCSS

Community engagement with students, families and the public to deepen their understanding of the CCSS

Advocacy and communications to maintain policymaker commitment to CCSS implementation

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While there are bright spots on implementation, progress has been uneven thus far and challenges remain.

States

10 states are currently **reviewing the CCSS and considering changes**.[1]

Fewer states committed to **administering the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments** in 2015-16 than in the previous year (21 vs. 30).[1]

Districts

92% of districts report facing **challenges finding adequate resources** to implement the standards.[2]

89% of districts believe they **do not have enough time** to fully implement the standards before accountability consequences related to student performance on aligned assessments begin to take effect.[2]

Educators

58% of K-12 educators who responded to an *Education Week* survey reported that their **textbooks and main curricular materials are not aligned** to the CCSS.[3]

16% of these educators feel **very prepared to teach** the CCSS to their students.[3]

Parents

54% of parents **oppose having educators in their community use the CCSS** to guide what they teach.[4]

67% of parents believe there is **too much emphasis on testing** in the public schools in their community.[4]

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Sources: 1. Education First (2015); 2. Stark Rentner and Kober (2014); 3. Education Week (2014); 4. Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup (2015)

Several funders formed collaborations to support states and districts through the transition to the Common Core.

These funder collaboratives have made important progress thus far:

Created new **classroom-ready instructional tools** for educators

Supported **alignment between state K-12 and higher education** systems

Diversified **advocacy coalitions** nationally and in multiple states

Informed the public about the CCSS and their implications for students

Strengthened **opportunities for teacher leaders** to shape implementation of the CCSS

Helped state policymakers manage the **transition to high-quality assessments**

As implementation continues, **how can funders build on these early successes for sustained change?**

And looking forward to continuing (and significant) needs in the field, **which kinds of funder collaboration will yield the desired results?**

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There are both benefits and risks to any collaboration, which funders must weigh before initiating partnerships.

Benefits

Opportunity to gain expertise in diverse issue areas beyond own specific grantmaking priorities.

Expanded impact to larger constituencies and/or across a wider area (state, region or the country).

Ability to combine investments to scale solutions for greater social returns.

Risks

Significant commitment in time and resources to establish and manage governance structure and decision-making process.

Continuous efforts to align collaboration activities to each funder's interests and grantmaking approach.

Reduced authority to make unilateral grant decisions in exchange for group deliberation and compromise.

Sources: Brest (2005), Mackinnon (2006), GrantCraft (2009), Seldon, Tierney and Fernando (2013), Briddell and Marra (2013), Education First (2015) and Grantmakers for Education (n.d.).

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Eight ingredients can help funder collaborations be successful.

1   **Definition of success**, **desired outcomes** and **expectations** for funder participation.

2   **Urgency** to achieve the collaborative's goals.

3   **Strong case for why collaboration is better than independent actions**, including why each funder is interested and committed to collaboration.

4   **Trust**, **mutual respect** and **sensitivity to each funder's internal culture**.

5   **Governance structure** that matches funder needs, facilitates nimble decision-making and enables funders to resolve challenges.

6   Willingness to **consider risky ideas**, **learn from the collaborative's activities** and **revisit priorities** as the education landscape evolves.

7   **Structure and process for managing the collaborative's activities**, such as developing overall strategy and identifying grantees (which can be led by a neutral third-party organization).

8   Shared agreement on an **exit plan** should any funder decide to leave the collaborative.

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Education First's decision-making matrix elevates three considerations to support funders working together.
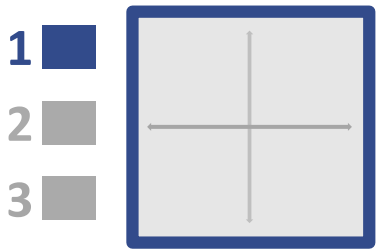
1 | Define the *problem* to work on together

2 | Decide on a *scope of action* to identify the universe of solutions

3 | Determine a *strategy and timeline* for meeting collective goals

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION

NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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First, ask: What problem or challenge are funders interested in tackling through the collaborative?

By defining the problem, funders clarify their purpose for working together, which should guide the collaborative's scope of action and strategy. For example:

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*A **specific problem in the field***: Funders work to impact how states, districts and schools adopt and implement the CCSS via the collaborative's direct actions.

▶ *Example: Create better and readily accessible instructional materials aligned to the CCSS to ensure consistent high-quality teaching and ultimately improved student learning.*

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*A **challenge that funders are facing***: Funders seek to enhance their own potential to support the CCSS by gaining more knowledge of the field, cultivating stronger relationships with peer funders and developing new partnerships with organizations outside the collaboration, among others.

▶ *Example: Strengthen the collective commitment of funders to the success of CCSS and improve their ability to make informed grantmaking decisions in the future to help support educators.*

These are not mutually exclusive options: Funders that aim to influence a particular element of CCSS implementation may also gain knowledge through collaboration to inform their own grantmaking.

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Next, ask: Based on the problem funders want to address, should the collaborative's scope of action be broad or narrow?

A ***broad scope of action*** is preferred when funders have diverse opinions about what the problem is and/or prefer to pursue different solutions to investigate options.

▶ *Example: Build the capacity and reach of key, well-positioned organizations to raise public awareness about the CCSS.*

A ***narrow scope of action*** applies when there is strong alignment among funders about what the problem is and how best to address it through particular solutions.

▶ *Example: Ensure states use high-quality assessments to measure student progress against the CCSS.*

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION

Funders focus on the **field at large** to identify **trends and opportunities** for action

Funders advance **shared solutions** to a **specific problem** to achieve well-defined objectives

NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION
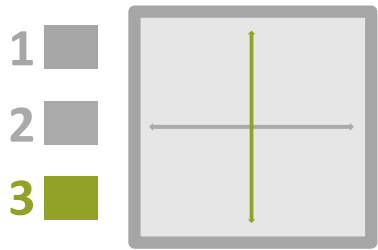
Finally, ask: To advance the solutions funders support, will the collaborative need an adaptable or a targeted strategy and timeline?

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

An *adaptable strategy and timeline* facilitates quick, nimble action by funders in response to evolving, unpredictable conditions.

▶ *Example: Help advocates respond to state-specific and emerging policy obstacles (and threats) to CCSS implementation.*

Funders exercise **flexibility** to address **emerging**, often unexpected, challenges and needs

A *targeted strategy and timeline* involves funder actions to resolve well-known, clear and predictable challenges.
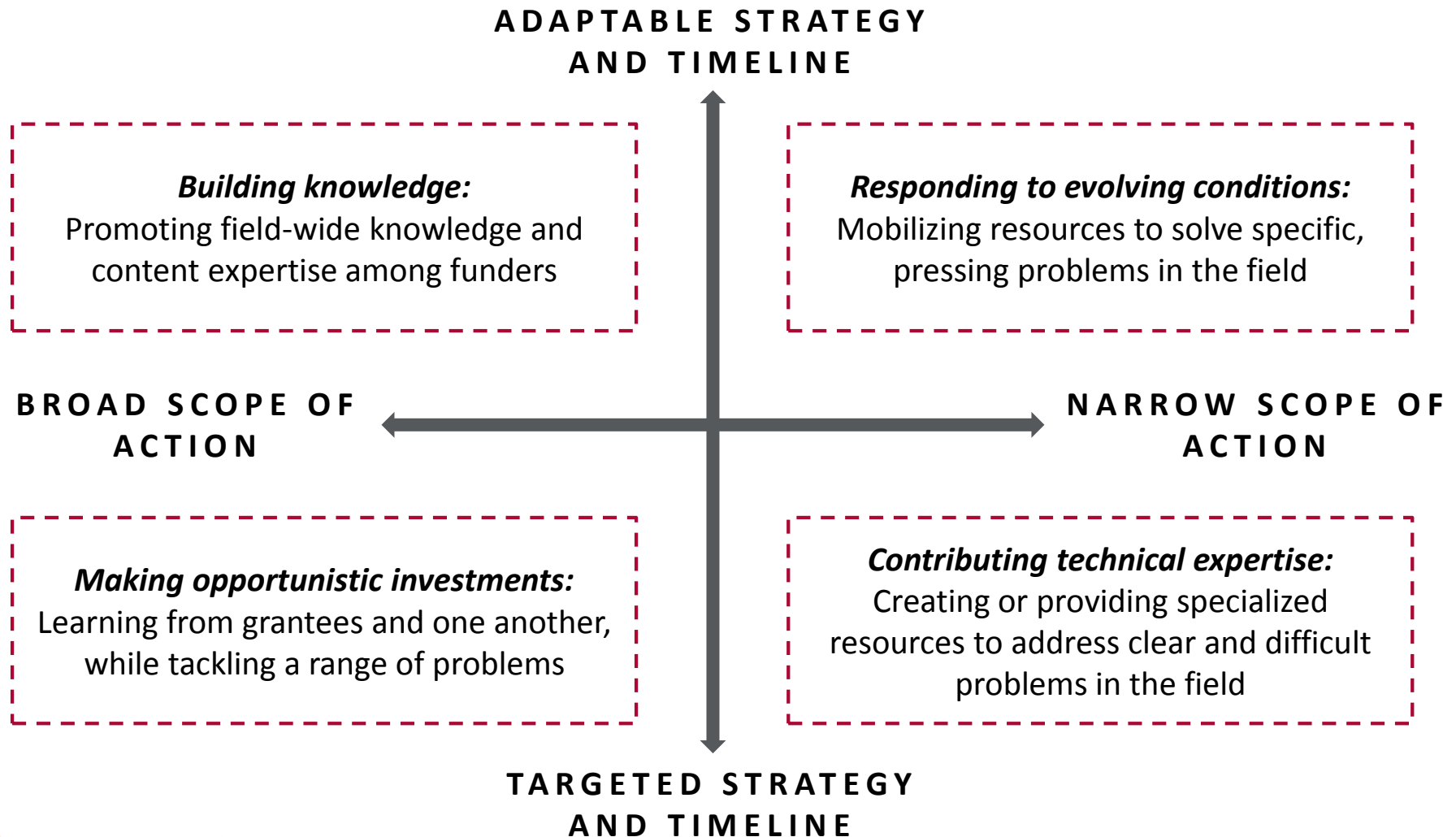
▶ *Example: Create more CCSS-aligned instructional materials that help educators address the unique needs of English language learners.*

Funders commit to solutions **tailored** to **established** challenges and needs

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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The three considerations help funders find the quadrant in the matrix that best translates their shared interests into opportunities for collaboration.

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

Building knowledge:
Promoting field-wide knowledge and content expertise among funders

Responding to evolving conditions:
Mobilizing resources to solve specific, pressing problems in the field

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION

NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION

Making opportunistic investments:
Learning from grantees and one another, while tackling a range of problems

Contributing technical expertise:
Creating or providing specialized resources to address clear and difficult problems in the field

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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Education First developed four case studies to show how these considerations can support different funder goals.*

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION

NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION

Building knowledge with a learning network:
Common Core Funders Working Group

Responding to evolving conditions in multiple states with a pooled fund:
High-Quality Assessment Project

Making opportunistic, aligned investments in a single state:
California Common Core Funder Collaborative

Contributing technical expertise with a new organization:
EdReports.org

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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*See Education First's complete funder collaboration guide for complete case studies.

Based on Education First's case studies, how should funders approach defining the problem?*

If the funder collaborative wants to solve a specific problem in the field: Agree on clear and measurable goals for success, and determine which aspects of the problem will fall within the collaborative's mission (and which will not). Consider how this focus aligns or intersects with any similar efforts in the field.

If the funder collaborative aims to tackle a challenge funders are facing: Create unique knowledge-sharing opportunities, discuss shared grantees and strive to avoid duplication of activities. Consider a shorter window of action: Check-in regularly to make sure the collaboration is making a difference and isn't just a discussion forum.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION

NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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*See Education First's complete funder collaboration guide for lessons learned from each case study.

Based on Education First's case studies, how should funders determine their scope of action?*

If the funder collaborative's scope of action is broad: Coalesce around shared funder interests and priorities to focus the collaborative's work (e.g., by "mapping" the public education system to identify high-leverage opportunities for joint action). Create a governance structure to ensure the focus remains relevant.

If the funder collaborative's scope of action is narrow: Develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the specific need the collaborative intends to meet (e.g., by engaging the researchers and practitioners with expertise) and a clear idea of what a "win" looks like.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY
AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE   NARROW SCOPE

OF ACTION   OF ACTION

TARGETED STRATEGY
AND TIMELINE

*See Education First's complete funder collaboration guide for lessons learned from each case study.

Based on Education First's case studies, how should funders develop their strategy and timeline?*

If the funder collaborative's strategy and timeline are adaptable: Establish a nimble internal decision-making process to enable quick changes to tactics, activities and timelines based on ongoing intelligence from grantees and other partners. Make sure goals are clear.

If the funder collaborative's strategy and timeline are targeted: Determine the scale and sustainability of the solution that the collaborative supports, but also ensure that these two are attainable and do not divert attention or resources away from the actual implementation of the solution.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY
AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE   NARROW SCOPE
OF ACTION   OF ACTION

TARGETED STRATEGY
AND TIMELINE

*See Education First's complete funder collaboration guide for lessons learned from each case study.

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Moving forward, Education First recommends that funder collaboratives consider five opportunities for action.*

1 As more states design their own **assessments**, provide advocacy and tools to ensure high quality and alignment to the CCSS.

2 Help state leaders design new approaches to **K-12 accountability systems** that leverage the greater flexibility that federal law now provides.

3 Create new models for **educator professional development**, especially for helping English language learners and students with disabilities achieve higher standards.
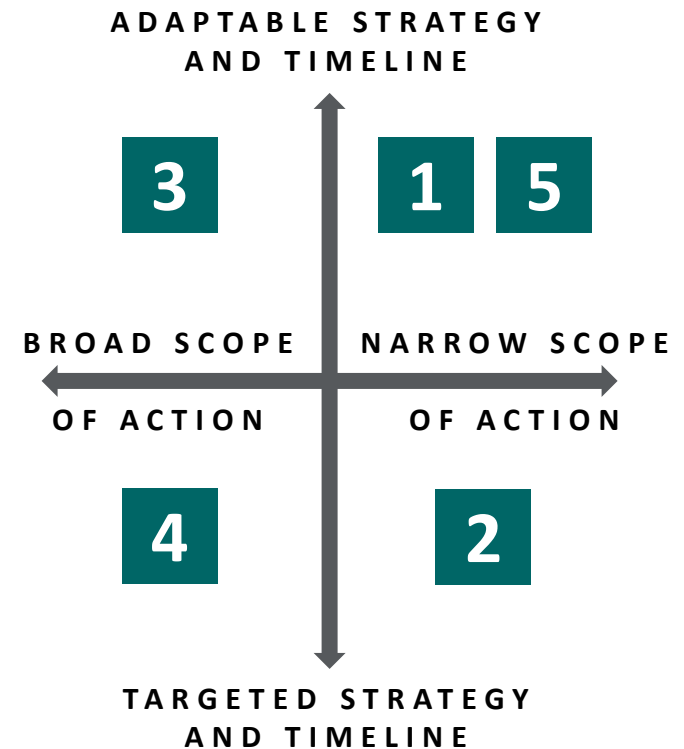
4 **Monitor** CCSS implementation, **evaluate** the effectiveness of new approaches, and **share lessons and case studies** with the field.

5 Create stronger incentives for publishers to produce more and better CCSS-aligned **instructional materials**.

Funders can use the decision-making matrix to explore these opportunities:

ADAPTABLE STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

BROAD SCOPE OF ACTION | NARROW SCOPE OF ACTION

3 | **1** **5**

4 | **2**

TARGETED STRATEGY AND TIMELINE

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*See Education First's complete funder collaboration guide for an analysis of each opportunity.

Finally, the matrix offers funders guidance as they pursue future collaborations focused on the CCSS.

Problem definition: Explicitly state your goals

The impact of funder collaborations can take different forms, as the four case studies in this guide show. **Funders should negotiate up-front what success looks like and how they will know they have accomplished what they set out to do together**.

Scope of action: Let form follow function

Different collaboration structures can be powerful forces for change in their own way—but **each structure is unique and better suited to accomplishing different goals**.

Strategy and timeline: Follow through on what you started

As Mark Twain might say, reports of the Common Core's death are greatly exaggerated. Real work remains in every state to increase knowledge and capacity for sustained implementation of the standards—even in states that have rebranded the standards or modified them slightly to accommodate state-specific goals. **Funders have made progress in tackling this widespread challenge and now have opportunities to continue collaborating to finish this work**.

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