

Common Core State Standards & the Transformation of Professional Development

Summer 2014

THIS BRIEF IS PART OF A SERIES:

- 1 THE NEW ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
- 2 THREE VIGNETTES THAT SHOWCASE THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT HELPS TEACHERS SUCCEED
- 3 WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO TO ADVANCE HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT SCALE

THE NEW ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



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ABOUT THIS SERIES

With its emphasis on content aligned to the actual expectations of colleges and employers, the Common Core State Standards can provide a foundational strategy for boosting student success. But success with the standards also requires that school, district and state leaders redesign and invest in the sort of professional development that meets a much higher bar for quality and impact – and that truly helps teachers be more effective.

The standards were produced in response to American schools' stagnant achievement levels relative to the rest of the world and are benchmarked against standards in other top performing countries. They were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators and experts to provide a clear and consistent framework so that students exiting the K–12 system would not need remediation before beginning college-level classes or going into the workforce.

Education First set out to better understand the professional development that educators need to help students meet these standards, and how to deliver it at scale and at depth. Our goal is to more clearly define and illustrate the specific supports and learning opportunities educators need and to translate conclusions into a series of policy changes that state and local leaders should consider.

This three-part series offers up research, observations and recommendations about the sort of professional learning educators need to help students achieve the new standards. To inform the findings in this series, we dug deeper into the question of what works and what is needed. In sharing what we learned and concluded, we have relied on the voices of those we interviewed to describe what they are experiencing on the front lines.



We looked at the existing research on high-quality professional development (see [sidebar](#) on page 7 in this brief for findings). We complemented this review with a series of interviews, gathering ideas and experiences from a diverse mix of educators, service providers and adult education experts around the country (see [Appendix A](#) for a list of interviewees and our methodology). We focused our examination on three different approaches to professional development delivery to see how districts in different circumstances and with different resources take steps toward ensuring high-quality professional learning for their educators. Finally, we benefited from the counsel and critical feedback of educators, researchers and other experts (listed in [Appendix A](#)), who read draft versions of this series and helped us to refine our conclusions and recommendations.

The series consists of the following briefs:



SUMMARY

An executive summary of the entire series concisely outlines our findings and recommendations.



BRIEF

1

In this brief (Brief #1), we describe what we learned about professional development innovations and — most important — what we think are the new, non-negotiable learning opportunities all teachers consistently need to help them succeed with the new demands of the Common Core.



BRIEF

2

In Brief #2, we offer vignettes about districts that are doing this work successfully, fleshing out examples that might generate useful ideas for other districts and states.



BRIEF

3

In Brief #3, we offer specific recommendations to state and district leaders in five significant areas that we believe exemplify what's needed to achieve high-quality professional learning at scale. These recommendations can help create professional learning systems that are replicable, affordable and effective.

As debates over the Common Core have sharpened over the past few months, we've found many of the arguments for turning back to be ill informed or disingenuous. We've listened carefully to the voices of teachers, who have told us they have not consistently received the support, coaching or tools they need to be confident in teaching students to meet the new, higher expectations. But we also have seen many inspiring examples of schools and districts working hand-in-hand with educators to provide deliberate and deep learning opportunities.

Looking to the 2014–15 school year and beyond we hope this series comes at an opportune time for policymakers and school district leaders to roll up their sleeves, to recommit to the standards and their promise for both student learning and the teaching profession, but also to make the tough choices to provide the regular, intentional and thoughtful structures that are needed for all teachers as they work to put the Common Core standards into action in their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Although too often portrayed as the “ugly stepchild” of the education reform movement, it’s time to admit that professional development is essential to effective implementation of the Common Core. Educators at all levels must have a deep understanding of the standards and be able to apply them well if students are to master them — and research and anecdotes suggest that teachers need support in learning and practicing these new demands.

At the same time, it’s also time to admit the significant changes in instruction required by the Common Core present a challenge to professional development as it is practiced in many school systems. And that’s a good thing for those of us who care about the quality of teaching, the future of the profession and ensuring that teachers have the support they need to succeed with the standards. There is not enough high-quality professional development that shows evidence of impact.ⁱ

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. Just as the Common Core sets forth a common vision for student learning refreshed for the demands of the 21st century, so too can the standards set the stage for a common vision for an empowered and renewed teaching profession and for what excellent teaching looks like.

As Education First looked into the research and conducted interviews with leading educators, we found significant agreement about the support teachers need to succeed with the new standards. However, in spite of this broad consensus, we also saw clearly that not all states and very few districts are implementing such approaches. Issues of quantity (how many teachers can be reached and how deeply) and quality (how aligned with the Common Core and principles of effective professional development) remain central for many states and districts as their timeline for full implementation and administration of the Common Core-aligned assessments draw near.

Delivering on the promise of the Common Core demands new levels of effective teaching in many more classrooms. And thus it creates urgency to ensure that teachers have access to the high-quality professional learning they need to succeed. But the standards also present opportunity, as the shift in expectations leads educators to seek more and better professional development efforts that enable them to more effectively work together to improve their practices.

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. Just as the Common Core sets forth a common vision for student learning refreshed for the demands of the 21st century, so too can the standards set the stage for a common vision for an empowered and renewed teaching profession and for what excellent teaching looks like.

THE GAME CHANGER

The Common Core State Standards represent an important change from many previous academic standards: The new standards coherently build a core set of skills and knowledge from grade to grade to help ensure that students are equipped to be successful after high school in the 21st century.

As such, the Common Core standards are not a reshuffling or refinement of previous academic standards; they are profoundly and fundamentally different from what the majority of teachers and students have experienced in the past:

- In literacy, the standards expect students to read more rigorous, content-rich fiction and informational texts, build academic vocabulary, engage in rich conversations and write using evidence carefully pulled from a text or multiple texts. This expectation contrasts with previous state standards that often asked students to respond to texts based on their feelings and opinions, without exploring how the text was written or what evidence was presented to influence a reader's thinking.
- In mathematics, each grade has major areas of emphasis — in contrast to the long decried but too little changed “mile wide and inch deep” coverage that has characterized math education in most schools. Students are now expected to focus on key topics, creating strong foundations in conceptual understanding, developing procedural skill and fluency, and applying problems inside and outside the math classroom.

With greater freedom comes a greater need for information and expertise to navigate the murky waters of the transition to the new standards, uncertain alignment of instructional materials, and new demands on teachers' skills and expertise.

In practical terms, to help students meet the new standards, teachers may be required to shift both what and how they teach and to develop a more discerning stance toward the materials they use. Incorporating the changes reflected in the Common Core may require teachers to deepen their own content knowledge and expand their understanding of effective teaching practice — in effect, to become continuous learners.

“We’re doing a K–8 math adoption in the district now — and teachers are looking for textbooks and curriculum that will tell them where to go — but that’s an old way of thinking,” said a math coach from Sacramento City Unified School District. “The textbook is only a resource.” For many educators, the new standards represent a shift away from being directed by textbooks and toward a sense of greater freedom and professionalism. And with greater freedom comes a greater need for information and expertise to navigate the murky waters of the transition to the new standards, uncertain alignment of instructional materials, and new demands on teachers’ skills and expertise.

Reflecting a decade or more of research findings, many state and district leaders have shed the illusion that real improvement comes from sit-and-get, one-shot workshops that don’t create an opportunity for sustained work, feedback, reflection and improvement. Still, because this traditional approach to professional development is less expensive than embedded approaches and an easy way to reach many teachers,ⁱⁱ we worry that it remains pervasive — a concern reinforced by recent surveys:

- In a 2007 study of teacher quality and related supports, nearly all teachers reported that they participated in content-focused professional development in reading or mathematics but few participated in more than 24 total hours of training.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Furthermore, these opportunities often take the form of large one-size-fits-all lectures that do not account for differing school contexts or allow for active learning. In a 2010 survey, 90 percent of teachers reported that their professional development consisted primarily of short-term conferences or workshops and less than a quarter reported that their professional development addressed the subject they taught.^{iv}

Teachers know they need support. In a 2013 survey of 900 K–12 public school teachers in 11 states, 49 percent said they felt somewhat prepared to teach what is expected in the Common Core and only 37 percent felt very prepared.^v Other research suggests only half of schools focus substantial attention on training teachers around the capabilities that the standards require, such as quantitative and conceptual reasoning or understanding how point of view and purpose shape the content and style of a text.^{vi}

FEATURES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LINKED TO IMPROVEMENT

A strong consensus in research literature, based on well-documented studies of professional learning, argues that high-quality professional development opportunities for teachers do the following:^{vii}

- Align with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities
- Focus on core content and model teaching strategies for the content
- Include opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies
- Provide the chance for teachers to collaborate
- Include follow-up and continuous feedback

Researchers have also found the following structures and features of professional development to be related to instructional improvement and student achievement:^{viii}

- *Sustained and regular activities:* Several studies found that professional development that was at least 14 hours in duration resulted in positive student growth. Programs that were shorter than 14 hours (such as one-day workshops) had no effect on student achievement.^{ix}
- *Job embedded:* Activities should be authentically related to the work of the teachers involved and informed by what the teachers are doing and need to do.
- *Collaborative:* Several studies have shown correlations between teacher collaboration and changes in teacher practice and student achievement.^x
- *Coaching:* When supported with coaching in conjunction with other professional development activities, 95 percent of teachers transferred the new skill into their classrooms; only 10 percent of teachers who received traditional training and no coaching implemented the new skill in their classrooms.^{xi} The effectiveness of coaching, however, hinges on the expertise of the coach.
- *Use of technology:* Technology is increasingly important but is best leveraged as part of a program that includes other features as well.
- *School context:* The school context — including its leadership, the coherence of the staff, whether the school has clear goals, etc. — affects the success of the program and should be a key consideration.

For educators to bring academic content alive for their students, they need to have deep content knowledge themselves, coupled with a variety of instructional approaches on hand. They develop these elements through time on task, persistent effort and continuous learning — which, as it turns out, is very similar to what the Common Core aims to make happen in classrooms.

“The Common Core has fundamentally changed professional development,” one provider told us. “It needs to be personal and meet teachers where they are and provide them with just-in-time resources for their own learning, just like for student learning.” Another provider explained, “Curriculum aligned to the Common Core demands a whole different kind of instruction. You need a whole new system of getting teachers ready for that capacity.”

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ALIGNED TO THE COMMON CORE

The experiences and commonalities among the three vignettes in [Brief #2](#) in this series, in addition to our conversations with practitioners, school leaders and researchers, have led us to three essential elements of professional development needed to help educators teach the Common Core:

1. Adult learning should be ongoing and active and include both collaboration and individual attention.
2. Professional learning should focus on building grade-level content and Common Core-aligned instructional practices.
3. Teachers should get support in identifying and using high-quality, Common Core-aligned instructional materials.

1

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

Like anything else, practice makes perfect. The challenge — and the opportunity — is that teachers cannot get what they need using only a textbook. Knowledge can be acquired through reading and listening but skills are developed through experience. Good professional development is not an occasional event or supplement; it is a key part of a vibrant education ecosystem. Ideally, for example, a school calendar should include explicit learning activities and supports for teachers but also milestones (benchmarks or indicators of impact) to gauge progress.

All of the educators and districts we spoke with emphasized that teachers need to engage in ongoing, meaningful analysis of teaching and learning, such as by rating and reviewing student work, examining student data or refining standards-based curriculum units. Peer observations or lesson modeling also can be effective, but teachers report they rarely internalize changes until they incorporate and apply the new techniques into their own instructional practice. The Basal Alignment Project is an example of this kind of meaningful professional development (see [sidebar](#)). As one advocate put it, “Working every day,

every week throughout the year with aligned text-dependent questions is the best form of professional development I am aware of. It happens every day and with students and teachers learning together.”

The professional development approaches we highlight in this series all include a strong and intentional focus on collaborative inquiry, application of learning in the classroom and opportunities to reflect on practice using student work and other data. These models focus educators’ attention and conversations on what is and is not working and include feedback loops and structured opportunities to reflect with peers and learn from experience. And these efforts seem to be paying off with higher student achievement and improved teacher performance.

As one school leader said, “Too many of us in education reform have believed it’s only the rock stars who can get stuff done — and only those go-getters can achieve the level of impact we want. But I’ve learned that is not true. Teachers can evolve and can be exposed to this new way of thinking and what’s possible for all kids — it just takes a while, requires tenaciousness and is high touch.”

The good news is that what’s needed most is exactly what teachers want: an approach that is ultimately about continuous improvement, deeper student inquiry and strengthened professional community.

ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A PROMISING START BUT PERSONAL CONNECTION STILL NEEDED

Ongoing and effective professional development is critical to implementing the Common Core—and, increasingly, educators and vendors are experimenting with how technology can provide deep learning experiences for teachers that can be scaled across states and provided at lower cost. Online professional development is expanding quickly and includes the following options:

- Online courses taught by expert teachers or higher education faculty
- Digital libraries of resources including lesson plans and supplemental materials
- Remote coaching using video or internet technology
- Video libraries of CCSS-aligned lessons taught by expert teachers who model effective techniques
- Digital portfolios
- Data portals that provide teachers with student assessment data, professional growth data and other information they can use to assess progress toward goals

The pace of adoption of online professional development varies considerably and states and districts are experimenting with various models and providers. Implementation of the Common Core has driven more educators to search online for both Common Core-aligned instructional materials and affordable and scalable professional development options.

New “next generation learning” structures¹ are creating unprecedented potential to differentiate and personalize learning for both teachers and students. *(continued on page 10)*

¹ Defined by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as “the intelligent use of technology to develop innovative learning models and personalized educational pathways.”

The traditional one-shot workshop model works fine if the purpose is to announce a new policy, explain a new curriculum or help teachers understand expectations and available resources. But the one-shot workshop is completely unsuitable for the Common Core era, when being able to successfully teach the standards requires practicing new skills and applying new understandings.

When describing the kind of training Expeditionary Learning has helped design for New York’s Network Team Institutes, one leader noted, “Professional development has to embody the shifts and changes that you hope students will get. That’s not a sit-and-listen style. It requires teachers to grapple with complex math problems and texts in a way that is evidence-based so they see what their students need to do and what a classroom using the new standards would feel like. You can’t get that by reading a book about it.”

A New York school leader noted that effective professional development also produces tangible products that teachers can use immediately after the experience. “Teachers want to know, ‘Is this helping me to produce something that I can use with success in my classroom tomorrow or the next day? Is it helping me develop a work product that will help me and save me time?’ That’s the bottom line. For example, for text complexity, we had teachers bring in their books and we had them use rubrics to identify the quantitative and qualitative measures of a complex text. So by the end of that experience they had actually looked at a novel or a text that they were planning to use, rating its level of complexity and reflected on whether it was truly a text worth using.”

ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED)

(continued from page 9) Technology has enabled teachers to come together in online learning communities, share lessons and other resources with a wider circle of colleagues (because the standards are common across states and districts), gain access to content experts and receive virtual coaching. For districts and schools with limited resources, these options can greatly enhance the quality of the professional learning they are able to offer teachers.

One example of this kind of technology-enabled professional learning is Aspire Public Schools’² Purple Planet online resource tool (developed in collaboration with BloomBoard), which provides teachers with resources, lessons and data aligned to an instructional rubric.^{xiii} As part of this program, all Aspire teachers create smart goals for themselves, and classroom observations that align to these goals can be uploaded for teachers to review.

Online professional development models are still in early stages of development, and there is mixed research on their efficacy.^{xiii} As these programs become standard practice, what we know about effective professional development applies to online strategies as much as in-person strategies. Technology needs to be embedded in a clear theory of action about professional learning and integrated into a coherent plan or strategy that is relevant to educator needs. Online learning communities require facilitation and accountability structures: a regular schedule of activities and discussion topics related directly to educator needs, a structure for peer accountability and a direct focus on the Common Core and content rather than on administrative issues.

Another ongoing issue for any online program is how to get educators to use it in a meaningful way. So far, most online programs address this issue by including some in-person facilitation and/or coaching in addition to online activities and collaboration. Aspire Public Schools, for example, provides new teachers with instructional coaches who meet with teachers regularly and use the online tools as part of their coaching. As with any online, interactive program, quality control and fidelity to the Common Core need constant attention.

² Aspire Public Schools is a charter management organization (CMO) serving over 13,500 students in 37 schools throughout California and in Memphis, Tennessee. Aspire Public Schools partners with BloomBoard, a provider of educational technology to support teacher development.

All of the districts in our three vignettes in [Brief #3](#) use some form of collective learning combined with school-based coaching to give teachers just-in-time guidance within the context of their own classrooms and schools. Monticello School District and Greece Central School District in New York, Washoe County School District in Nevada and Sacramento City Unified School District in California all provide instructional coaches who offer classroom-level support for teachers. These coaches help teachers develop lessons plans, provide lesson demonstrations, examine student work with teachers and give one-on-one, non-evaluative coaching.

We heard consistently that teachers have embraced the standards as a gateway to instructional freedom. Rather than being dictated to by a static textbook, the standards have created a collaborative cycle of inquiry in which teachers' ongoing experience shapes the curriculum. Teachers create a lesson, use it in the classroom, bring it to a broad set of teachers for consideration and discussion, and examine the impact of that lesson on student learning and achievement.

As one math coach explained, "We ask teachers to be students and to reflect on the content — and how it could have been taught differently. We've emphasized intentionality before, but that's the real focus of our professional development now."

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

General information about the standards, presented to teachers of different grades and subjects, will not enable them to teach specific grade-level concepts. Teachers need to deeply understand the content they teach, anticipate problems students may have learning that content and employ effective instructional strategies to help students overcome those potential hurdles. Building content knowledge, based on the focus and progressions of the new standards, should be the centerpiece of all professional development.

For example, before the advent of the Common Core, text was not necessarily the core of English language arts instruction. Now the expectation that students will delve deeply into informational texts, cite evidence and produce narrative arguments is changing how educators think about the texts they use and the tasks they assign to students. Standard textbooks may not provide the complex informational text that will challenge students to build their vocabulary or identify evidence for an argument. This means, for example, teachers may choose more primary texts and develop tasks that require students to engage more deeply with the text, using the "text as teacher."

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The literacy standards are structured by grade level, and in-depth professional development on the content of the standards does not lend itself to mixed grade grouping. "The structure of the standards really pushes specific grade-based and subject-focused activities if it is going to be successful," noted one district literacy coach. "You may have the same base structure for every grade but there are specifics added for subjects and more specifics as you go to grade level. These kinds of things have directed us to more specificity and smaller groups with the same interest. Even if it's a hassle to serve many groups, it's more productive."

In mathematics, “the major work of the grade” means teachers must cover a few critical aspects of math in great depth; but many educators, especially elementary school teachers (and even some professional development providers), lack the conceptual understanding to do this. Most were taught algorithms or step-by-step mechanical procedures rather than grappling with why a mathematical idea is important and how it can be useful. Educators, like their students, need mathematical fluency and the ability to apply concepts flexibly. And they need to understand the intentional structure and sequence of the standards — each standard is an extension of previous learning.

The Common Core writers have produced a set of [progressions documents](#) that have been used by professional development providers and districts to structure teacher learning opportunities that are content-focused and relevant to specific grade levels.^{xiv} “Educators need to know the standards deeply, including progressions and the specific work of the grades,” said one district administrator. “They need to understand where what they are teaching falls. When they don’t know, they try to cover everything — and that’s when we get into mile wide and inch deep.”

Because helping students achieve deep understanding requires teachers to come at material from a variety of angles, the standards also involve [instructional shifts](#).^{xv} Teachers need the ability to push students to think critically by, for example, posing more 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. Instead of asking students for an answer and moving on, teachers foster inquiry and collaboration by asking students to explain their reasoning.

For example, as one education leader in New York explained, “Reading fluently is very different from being able to analyze and extract meaning. If teachers are using nonfiction, instruction is often still too focused on ‘how does this text makes you feel.’ But if you apply the standards to Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail,’ you are noticing his use of words, how each piece builds to a strategic crescendo. You talk about the order of arguments, why he is building them this way, and what is the cumulative impact of these choices. You are doing something different and you are ready to try writing something yourself that is more premeditated. That is a very different classroom, and teachers are not typically prepared to help students walk through a learning experience that achieves the standards.”

Teachers also need the ability to differentiate instruction for students with a range of abilities and learning styles and among special populations of students (such as English language learners, special education students and gifted and talented students). Several district leaders cited the critical need for professional development around differentiation of instruction aligned to the standards. These are not just aspirational expectations: It’s time to deliver for students, not just expose them to material and move on.

Several innovative districts and professional development providers are giving teachers opportunities to reflect on and revise their instruction by becoming learners themselves. In Washoe County, professional development is intentionally and explicitly designed to start with educators’ understanding of the standards and then guide them through a process of designing lessons, teaching those lessons and reflecting on the student outcomes to refine their practice.

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Some providers are focusing their materials and trainings on fewer concepts so that educators can go into greater depth each topic. For example, rather than covering all of third grade in one session, Illustrative Mathematics provides professional development sessions that focus on a single task to illuminate points that can be applied to other tasks, topics and concepts.

In New York, Network Team Institute trainers design sessions that allow teachers to play the role of students and experience learning the material. Teachers read a text, write about it and think about the points where they want to go deep and have students analyze and share their reasoning. Teachers unpack the way the students think and consider ways to push students' thinking deeper. This hands-on approach requires teachers to be vulnerable and take risks, but they report that the experience is richer and has more lasting results on their instructional practice than a sit-and-get training.

CURRICULAR RESOURCES SUPPORTING COMMON CORE-ALIGNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Creating sample curricula aligned to the standards is a powerful professional development tool, as is assessing curricula for alignment to the Common Core.

There are at least a dozen rubrics currently available to districts, schools and educators to use to determine alignment and quality of instructional materials already on the market, such as: Achieve's [EQuIP](#) and [OER](#) rubrics, Student Achievement Partners' [Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool \(IMET\)](#), Illustrative Mathematics' [Task Review Criteria](#) as well as rubrics developed by the [National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics](#) and various states such as Louisiana and Tennessee. Using these tools to evaluate instructional materials requires substantial training and calibration, creating both an opportunity and a demand for additional professional development.

Another resource for both professional development and creation of CCSS-aligned materials is the [Basal Alignment Project \(BAP\)](#), an initiative of the Council of the Great City Schools and Student Achievement Partners. The BAP convenes district teams of educators who focus on literacy, English language learners, students with disabilities, and other areas to align and write questions for curriculum materials that support teachers in teaching the Common Core English language arts and literacy standards. The sessions focus specifically on the work that must be done with district writing teams to align current basals by developing text-based questions to selections in grades 3 through 5. Once these materials are approved, Student Achievement Partners posts them on [Edmodo](#) for use by more than 43,000 educators, and districts often post these on their websites.

In late 2014, a new nonprofit, [EdReports.org](#), will begin reviewing instructional materials for alignment to high-quality instruction (including alignment to the Common Core) and training educators to conduct these reviews. EdReports.org will start by publishing reviews of K–8 mathematics materials and will expand to high school mathematics and K–12 English language arts materials in 2015 and beyond.

[Learning List](#), a for-profit company that reviews textbooks for alignment to state standards (not necessarily the Common Core) and also uses educators as reviewers, posts reviews on its members-only website.

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, Common Core-aligned classroom materials — whether those are individual lessons, intact units of study or an entire curriculum. The current dearth of aligned 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.

A 2014 article in *Education Week* profiled the experience of two districts in their pursuit of excellent curriculum: one purchased materials, and the other wrote its own.^{xvi} Each approach focused on helping teachers discern quality and illustrates how the standards ask teachers to be flexible and astute in their use of instructional materials.

- Florida's Orange County Public Schools in Orlando undertook a rigorous process after producing criteria for new materials to achieve "the spirit and letter" of the standards. The district invested \$14 million for K–5 materials and \$10 million for middle and high school materials — but also produced scope-and-sequence documents and quarterly listings of the standards that need to be taught at each grade level. The district rebuilt its content maps, which lay out instructional units of several days to several weeks in length and are organized around "essential questions." The district's four math and English language arts coaches also worked with teachers in its 122 elementary schools to help teachers get comfortable using the materials in their classrooms.
- By contrast, Long Beach Unified School District in California began by appointing a district team to write a curriculum from scratch. The team drew upon English language arts resources, such as a bank of free questions composed by the Basal Alignment Project (see [sidebar](#)). In math, the team covered fewer concepts in greater depth than in the past; instructional units are designed around problem-solving, demonstrating an understanding of math concepts and collaborative discussion. The units also include formative strategies to help teachers gauge students' learning as they go along.

"Giving us curriculum that supports the standards made our teachers understand the standards."

Aligned instructional supports and tangible materials help to make the transition to the Common Core more real for teachers. "For us, had it not been for the state's release of the modules, the standards wouldn't have had much of an impact," a deputy superintendent of a school district in New York explained. "Giving us curriculum that supports the standards made our teachers understand the standards. We had talked about the six instructional shifts when the Common Core came out, which was great, but that had no context. It wasn't until we actually saw the curriculum and saw how the shifts are applied to a standards-based lesson that it made sense. So you should start with some sort of foundational curriculum or work that binds all that together."

Many teachers need more than a set of model lessons to study and emulate; they need the whole curriculum or help thinking about a year-long course of study. Recognizing this reality, a high priority for the Colorado Department of Education has been its District Sample Curriculum project, which is designed to both train teachers to create high-quality instructional tools and distribute the tools to all schools in the state.

What makes Colorado’s District Sample Curriculum project stand out from similar efforts in other states is that it aims for a Common Core-aligned plan of instruction for the entire year. Colorado’s sample curricula show teachers a possible “year at a glance.” Organized around key concepts to emphasize in each year, the samples include learning strategies, resource suggestions, a series of units of study, differentiation options and assessment ideas. The samples also offer possible sequencing of grade-level and content-specific standards across courses or years. According to a leader at the department, “One of the things we’ve tried in talking to teachers about the standards is avoiding simple statements about ‘this is how instruction needs to change.’ Without a curriculum to guide what teachers are teaching and a plan for how to spend the year, it’s insufficient. An exemplar lesson is nice, but a plan of instruction for the year is more than just a bunch of model lessons.”

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The process of vetting or creating materials can be, in itself, excellent professional development as long as it is anchored securely in the standards and the instructional shifts. As one district leader in Sacramento City observed, “Teachers are more closely examining instructional materials. Three or five years ago, we were more textbook-dependent. Now that the standards require a different level of understanding and a new focus on using text and evidence from the text, they are compelling teachers to do more analysis of the teaching resources available and to augment what they are using in the classroom. This is a blessing and a curse. It can be overwhelming at times to sort through all the resources out there, but it is helping our teachers see and understand what is really required.”

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 also relied on the help and guidance of these individuals—plus those above with an asterisk (*) next to their name—to read early drafts and provide feedback on our findings and recommendations:

Tracey Crow	<i>Director of Publications</i>	Learning Forward
Stephanie Hirsch	<i>Executive Director</i>	Learning Forward
Katya Levitan-Reiner	<i>Senior Associate</i>	Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation

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