

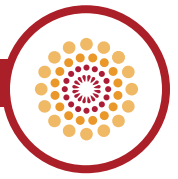
Common Core State Standards & the Transformation of Professional Development

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

WHAT DOES HIGH-QUALITY, COMMON CORE-ALIGNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LOOK LIKE? THREE VIGNETTES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Just as important, Education First is grateful to the many thoughtful educators who are committed to improving teaching practices, reviewed copies of these briefs and counseled us in shaping the findings in this series. We have noted these individuals in [Appendix A](#).

We also are grateful to the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation for its support in underwriting this research and series, although we acknowledge that the conclusions are our own and do not necessarily represent those of the foundation.

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 [Brief #1, Essential Elements of Common Core-Aligned Professional Development](#) for our 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:



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



In 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.



In this brief (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.



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

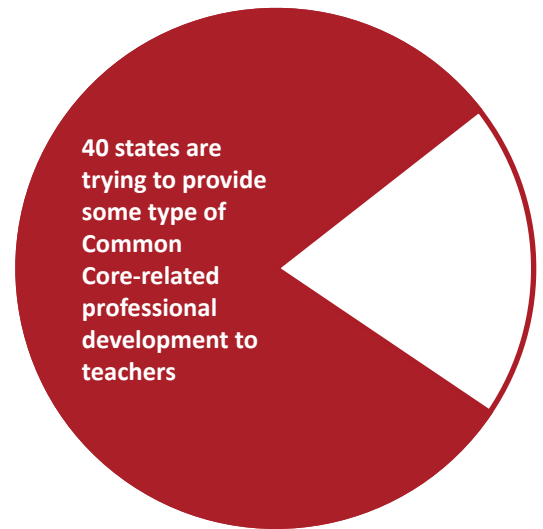
Providing all teachers — not just a few — with high-quality learning opportunities that are tailored to the unique college- and career-ready expectations of the Common Core is a pressing challenge for states and districts.

According to a 2013 Center for Education Policy study, 40 states are trying to provide some type of Common Core-related professional development to teachers, and all but one of those states are providing professional development for principals as well.ⁱ These activities have taken the form of disseminating materials for training teachers (in 37 states), carrying out statewide initiatives (in 36 states) and encouraging schools and districts to develop professional learning communities (in 33 states). However, the majority of states report major challenges in providing CCSS-related professional development, noting particular difficulties in providing high-quality efforts at scale.ⁱⁱ

But not every state and district is stuck when it comes to these questions. Drawing on our experience and recommendations from educators, we zeroed in on three very different approaches employed in differing contexts around the country. While these efforts aren't flawless, we believe they showcase the sort of constant, intentional learning opportunities that educators need to implement the Common Core. These examples also highlight principles and strategies that any state or district can apply.

In this brief, we sketch out these exemplary approaches in three short vignettes:

- **Expeditionary Learning and the New York State Education Department.** This vignette illustrates how one of New York State's vendors for a central, statewide train-the-trainer model (which provides content and direction) can be reinforced and extended by district-specific support (which can be tailored and adjusted to local needs).¹
- **California Office to Reform Education and Sacramento City Unified School District.** This multi-district consortium approach illustrates how thinking creatively about resource allocation and cross-district networks can further economies of scale, provide access to wider networks of knowledge and strengthen local professional development strategies.
- **Nevada's Washoe County School District.** This grassroots approach illustrates how a single district with limited funds can use free resources and already-scheduled school training days to successfully deliver professional development.



¹ We deliberately focused our attention during this project on Expeditionary Learning and some of the New York school districts that have chosen to work more extensively with the organization. However, New York also has engaged other vendors to provide statewide professional development as part of its Network Team Institute training model, and many New York districts have benefited from the Network Team Institutes without further engaging EL.

1

EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING AND THE NEW YORK STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

MODELS FOR SCALING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PAST TRAIN-THE-TRAINER EFFORTS

Founded in 1991, Expeditionary Learning (EL) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering higher achievement and greater engagement in school by challenging students to think critically and take active roles in their classrooms and communities. EL began as a whole-school reform model, working with districts and charter boards across the country to open new schools and transform existing schools. EL also has developed a high-touch approach to professional development that incorporates week-long summer institutes, school-based coaching and a series of shorter institutes during the school year built around specific topics²; research on this model points to the success of this approach and multiple studies show significantly increased student achievement in EL schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

More recently, EL has begun to work with states and districts to adapt this effective model and provide dynamic professional development that supports Common Core-aligned instruction.

NEW YORK'S NETWORK TEAM INSTITUTES PROVIDE A COMMON LEARNING EXPERIENCE

In 2011, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) issued a competitive request for proposals to design a freely available curriculum aligned to the Common Core as well as trainings for Network Team Institutes (NTIs).³ Intended to be the primary vehicle for statewide delivery of professional development as New York schools began implementing the Common Core, NTI trainings were designed to provide a common experience for district and regional teams, principals, teachers and instructional coaches, who would then deliver training and provide resources in their home districts and schools. At NTIs, educators participate in content-based activities that allow them to experience what they will be asking students to do and observe, primarily on video, what CCSS-aligned teaching and learning looks like in practice. Teams also think through implementation challenges, such as working with low-performing students or students with disabilities.

EL was awarded a contract to develop literacy curriculum for grades 3–5 and to work with NYSED and other vendors to build out and deliver NTI trainings that would reach about 800 educators. (EL also received a subsequent subcontract for the grades 6–8 literacy curriculum and associated professional development.)

This work engendered a huge transformation of the professional development model EL had honed with its network and of its own organizational focus and capacity: Instead of working only with individual schools and small groups of teachers, the organization was developing curriculum and materials for 300 people at a single institute. Each training session had to include a professional development “kit” — comprised of facilitator guides, hand-outs and overviews — that would be posted on NYSED’s

² EL directly supports more than 160 schools and 4,000 teachers, serving 53,000 students in 33 states. It also reaches thousands of additional teachers through professional services work in New York and other states.

³ NTIs are funded through New York’s Race to the Top federal grant.

engageNY.org website for participants and others to duplicate and use as needed.⁴ “External demand was changing our organization to lift up resources to meet the challenge [of implementing the new standards],” explained an EL leader.

A central challenge was to make the trainings personal, active and challenging — rather than sit-and-get sessions — so that educators could truly experience what the new standards expected and begin to internalize new teaching approaches that they could take back to their schools and classrooms. To keep the trainings active and personal at a large scale, EL developed strategies such as using table facilitators to guide discussions and soliciting feedback from participants to determine subgroup meetings.

DISTRICTS BUILD ON STATE TRAININGS USING A COMMON VENDOR AND COMMON CURRICULUM

Some New York districts combined NTI trainings, the materials on engageNY.org and EL’s curricular modules to extend their own professional development activities and plans to support all teachers.

For example, the Monticello School District – a small, rural county with 3,000 students and approximately 300 staff members – committed to provide follow-up support to every staff member in within 30 days of each NTI training its district team attended. The district also adopted the EL English language arts curriculum modules for grades 3-8 and, to support that adoption, contracted with EL to provide in-depth, in-school coaching and two professional development sessions to all teachers on scaffolding models for struggling learners (a need identified by teachers).

The additional support for Monticello teachers aligned with the NTI trainings but was customized to the district’s context. As a district leader explained, “We decided that if we were going to invest our teachers’ success in these modules, we needed to kick it up a notch. Instead of waiting for the NTIs, we were going to bring EL right to us. They started getting everyone on the same boat and then into classrooms and then came together at the end of the day. Then conversations carried forward at the next meeting without the EL professional developer. Professional development has to be nimble and provide what teachers are begging for and EL is willing to do that.”

EL’s model for supporting teacher learning and the Common Core has fit well into Monticello’s “tree of communication and professional development” approach, in which district, building and grade-level teams look at data and reflect on practice. The district also uses instructional coaches in elementary schools and department instructional leads in middle and high schools to facilitate discussions and trainings.

Monticello School District has experienced tremendous growth in student achievement over the last few years, which district leaders ascribe to their work with EL’s CCSS-aligned curriculum modules and its intentional approach to professional development. According to one district leader, “We had an average of a year to a year-and-a-half growth in half a year on our MAP⁵ results at the third, fourth and fifth grade levels.”

⁴ [EngageNY.org](https://engageNY.org) is developed and maintained by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to support the implementation of key aspects of the New York State Board of Regents Reform Agenda. EngageNY.org is dedicated to providing educators across New York State with real-time, professional learning tools and resources to support educators in reaching the State’s vision for a college and career ready education for all students.

⁵ MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) assessments provide detailed, actionable data about where each child is on their unique learning path. Delivered electronically, MAP is an adaptive, formative assessment that school districts offer several times a year and use to benchmark student achievement. For more information on MAP, see www.nwea.org.

New York's Greece Central School District, which has 11,000 students and approximately 1,200 teachers, also adopted EL's English language arts modules and asked EL to work more closely with its educators in a sustained way. In addition, to complement and extend what its teams learned at the NTI, district leaders provided school-building coaches and teacher leaders to observe classroom practices, work one-on-one with teachers and review data.

"We look at NTI training for content," explained a district leader. "We send directors of English, math and coordinators and teachers to those. We turnkey what comes from NTI and also take advantage of what's on engageNY.org." EL's training for English language arts teachers built on the NTIs, but district leaders worked with EL to customize the professional development to their context; in particular, EL focused on extending the modules for students with special needs.

For Greece Central, the Common Core-aligned modules have shaped professional development, providing the content and a common foundation upon which to build coaching and peer conversations about instructional practice. As one district leader put it, "Had it not been for the state's release of the modules, the Common Core would not have had much of an impact. Giving us curriculum that supports the standards made our teachers understand the standards more. Common curriculum allowed us to have common conversations about something that was tangible and real. In the past I might bring eighth grade teachers together and assume that they all had the same curriculum. Now I can say we're going to talk about Module 4B and everyone is on Module 4B. This has allowed professional development to focus on the work."

"We decided that if we were going to invest our teachers' success in these modules, we needed to kick it up a notch."

2

CALIFORNIA OFFICE TO REFORM EDUCATION AND SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

The California Office to Reform Education (CORE) is a consortium of 10 school districts working together to improve student outcomes and foster cross-district communities of shared knowledge and practice.^{6 iv} In 2011 (the same year it formed), CORE developed a federal Race to the Top application that included a plan to implement Common Core standards with targeted professional development.

Although the Race to the Top application wasn't funded, leaders of the participating districts remained committed to their proposals and decided to develop a "professional capital system," in which cross-district learning teams meet regularly (both face-to-face and virtually) to discuss goals related to CCSS implementation. In summer 2012, for example, the learning teams focused on a set of performance assessment modules that were developed by 250 teachers and leaders and piloted with about 15,000 students across the CORE districts. More recently, the learning teams focused on strengthening school and district leaders' "change management" strategies to successfully support teachers in making the changes involved in CCSS implementation and other initiatives.

Although the CORE districts share common goals and their leaders and curriculum specialists participate in these cross-district communities of practice, districts adapt the strategies shared in these learning teams to their own contexts. In Sacramento City Unified School District, for example, although district

⁶ The 10 districts are: Fresno, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Francisco, Oakland, Santa Ana, Sanger, Clovis and Garden Grove.

leaders have developed their own professional development approach (described below), the cross-district communities of practice have helped district leaders recognize and address some specific challenges and opportunities of CCSS implementation.

In 2013, eight of the 10 CORE districts submitted a joint request to the U.S. Department of Education for a waiver from ESEA accountability requirements, which was subsequently granted and freed up roughly \$150 million in Title I funds that the districts had been required to spend on tutoring and transportation services.^v Some of the CORE districts used these extra funds to provide more instructional time and more robust professional development, particularly in struggling schools. Many districts also paired teachers from different schools and districts to share teaching methods and best practices.^{7 vi} These districts like all others in California further benefited from a one-time state appropriation in the 2013-14 budget to support local implementation of the Common Core.

SACRAMENTO CITY IMPLEMENTS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLE BUILT ON A PROCESS OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Sacramento City (approximately 43,000 students and 2,000 teachers) was an early implementer of the Common Core, benefiting from strong leadership committed to the standards and improving student achievement.

In 2010, the district convened a stakeholder committee (including high school students, community members, teachers and parents) to help the district develop a CCSS implementation plan. In a gradual process through 2010 and 2011, the district invited teachers to learn more about the standards and then invited schools to, as one district leader explained, “try out a deeper implementation of the

English language arts standards first so we could learn about the roadblocks to anticipate and also what infrastructure would need to be in place to scale and sustain the work.” Implementation of the math standards started in 2012, and the district has embedded the CORE-supported performance assessment modules in schools and classrooms.

In Sacramento, math and English language arts learning cadres meet in grade bands to focus on the “work of the grade,” share and model lessons, look at student work and reflect on their work in a cyclical process. Coaches provide additional real-time support for teachers in their classrooms.

District leaders in Sacramento City, with input from teachers, have developed and implemented a “professional learning cycle” built on a process of collaborative inquiry, teacher-developed instructional modules, data review and reflective practice. Math and English language arts learning cadres meet in grade bands to focus on the “work of the grade,”⁸ share and model lessons, look at student work and reflect on their work in a cyclical process. Coaches provide additional real-time support for teachers in their classrooms.

⁷ Sacramento City withdrew from participation in the CORE waiver in April 2014 under pressure from the Sacramento City Teachers Association, which argued that the waiver gave too much power to an outside organization, CORE. The district remains a member of the CORE consortium.

⁸ The Common Core standards define the major academic topics (the “major work of the grade”) for each grade level, suggesting that these should be the areas that teachers address in lessons and curriculum.

3

WASHOE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

A GRASSROOTS MODEL OF COMMON CORE-ALIGNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT⁹

Washoe County School District — Nevada’s second-largest district, encompassing the Reno/Lake Tahoe area and with more than 65,000 students and 3,300 teachers — is three years into implementation of the Common Core. The district has become known as a “creative implementer” because of its success in developing an effective professional development model under tight budget restrictions.^{vii} Although Nevada was granted an ESEA waiver in August 2012, which has allowed the state more flexibility with its funds and freedom from NCLB’s timelines, the state did not receive federal Race to the Top money to jump-start Common Core efforts or provide extra support to teachers.

Instead, with limited resources and very little state guidance or interference, Washoe County has created a grassroots model of professional development that takes advantage of free resources and strategic partnerships with national organizations to help teachers and leaders deeply understand and then implement the Common Core.

COMMITTED TEACHERS BEGIN WORKING TOGETHER

The centerpiece of the district’s CCSS-aligned professional development is the Core Task Project (CTP) and related Core Task Implementation Project (CTiP). The CTP began in 2010 with a group of 18 elementary teacher leaders who came together to understand the Common Core instructional shifts through examination of rubrics, sample lessons and free, web-based videos from national organizations. The project has now grown to include more than 1,000 English language arts and secondary social studies teachers at 25 of the district’s 63 schools.^{10 viii}


CTP is a three-week model that is built into the district’s professional development hours. In the first week, educators spend half-days focusing intensively on the content of the standards, using videos from primary sources, such as the standards developers at Student Achievement Partners (SAP). As one of the creators of CTP noted, “The CTP is really about teachers trying to figure out what it means to do Common Core. We selected a path where we share a message that is unfiltered. We go straight to the sources.”^{ix} In the second week, educators return to their schools to implement what they have learned with the support of CTP facilitators. In the third week, educators again spend half-days debriefing, reflecting and continuing their professional learning.

The CTiP augments the initial three-week model and functions as a cross-school professional learning community. CTiP elementary school teams meet monthly in grade bands to plan common lessons, reflect on student work and apply what they’re learning directly to their practice. They use exemplar

Washoe County has taken advantage of free resources and strategic partnerships with national organizations to help teachers and leaders deeply understand and then implement the Common Core.

⁹ Material for this vignette was primarily drawn from: Katie Cristol and Brinton S. Ramsey, *Common Core in the Districts: An Early Look at Early Adopters*, (Indianapolis, IN: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2014).

¹⁰ For more information on the Core Task Project, see www.coretaskproject.com.



lessons, evidence guides, instructional practice guides and publisher’s criteria from SAP, the Basal Alignment Project and others, and they also use an online Edmodo site to reflect together on their work and maintain communications. Schools are expected to devote two to four early-release days (already a regular part of the school calendar) to professional learning with the full staff.

THOUGHTFUL USE OF FREE RESOURCES HELPS MAINTAIN A CONSISTENT MESSAGE ACROSS THE DISTRICT

Use of video and other common resources (such as materials offered on the engageNY.org website, evidence guides and instructional practice guides), even without a common CCSS-aligned curriculum in the district, has helped maintain a consistent message about the standards among those who participate in Washoe County’s CTP and CTiP experiences. The instructional practice guides, produced by SAP, in particular have established a common district-wide language about Common Core instruction, giving everyone a shared set of practices to look for in observing and providing feedback.¹¹ As teachers come together to reflect on their work, they have become more comfortable and felt more accountable in making instructional shifts.

As grassroots initiatives, the CTP and CTiP have not reached all of the schools and teachers in the district, but participation is growing. The district asked the teacher leaders who created the CTP and CTiP to develop and lead a professional development session for all district teachers, including specialists and arts and physical education teachers. The full-day training focused on the standards in English language arts and literacy and was facilitated by site-based coaches and specialists, teacher leaders, building administrators and central office administrators — all of whom were given tightly vetted materials to ensure consistency of message. Ongoing follow-up sessions were then offered once a month on early-release days, focusing in alternating quarters on the math and English standards.

¹¹ Instructional Practice Guides can be found at www.achievethecore.com.

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

ENDNOTES

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- viii. Alyssa Morones. “Teachers Lead the Way in Nevada Leader’s Common Core Project,” *Education Week*, March 3, 2014.
- ix. Morones, 2014.