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Roadmap for a Successful Transition to the Common Core in States and Districts

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Introduction and summary

The Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by more than 40 states, are one of the most important reforms to American public education in decades.¹ The standards will improve the quality of education by creating a roadmap for the knowledge and skills students need to know to be successful in the 21st century. If implemented correctly, the new standards will make rote memorization, simplified curricula, and bubble tests things of the past. Instead, students will be taught critical thinking and reading skills, including using data to problem solve and construct arguments, and to be stronger writers. The Common Core also will encourage changing the classroom experience. Students will work together and delve more deeply into complex concepts, and engage in project- and discovery-based learning. Importantly, the Common Core will give parents confidence that the standards used to teach their children are evidence-based and aligned with what they will need to be successful after high school—not just in college, but in their careers and in life.

Despite the many benefits of the Common Core, its bipartisan support, and the widespread adoption and integration into state plans to redesign their education systems, the success of the standards is in jeopardy. Several states are reconsidering their commitment to the Common Core standards and the aligned assessments.² Some on the far right are using the standards for political gain by claiming they are an attempt by the federal government to dictate education standards. This is despite the fact that the standards were created under the initiation and leadership of bipartisan state leaders and developed with absolutely no input from federal actors. At the same time, there are legitimate concerns about the implementation process. It has been uneven and many teachers and parents are unfamiliar with the standards. Educators across the country are concerned that they have received inadequate support and have not been sufficiently engaged in the implementation process. Many teachers are apprehensive about the use of student performance on the new assessments in teacher evaluation.³

These are all valid concerns, but the good news is that they can be addressed. Indeed, states across the country are getting many aspects of implementation right. Although no state has implemented the standards perfectly, there are many examples of best practices to help states course correct where needed without compromising the integrity of the Common Core or the benefits it will have for students. Building on these best practices, we recommend that states and districts focus their efforts on nine critical steps required to effectively translate standards into high-quality instruction. Specifically, states and districts should:

- Administer better, fairer, and fewer tests.
- Continue to improve and implement education evaluation and support systems but phase in high-stakes consequences for teachers and students that are based on the new Common Core-aligned assessments.
- Maintain accountability systems based on disaggregated student results on state assessments using the outcomes of the system to target more dollars and resources to students and schools that are struggling.
- Ensure that teachers are engaged in the development of—and have access to—comprehensive curricula and instructional materials aligned with the Common Core standards.
- Invest in training and ongoing professional development for educators.
- Provide teachers with more time for ongoing professional development as well as to plan and collaborate together.
- Engage educators, parents, and other stakeholders in the implementation effort.
- Assist districts and schools to further develop their technological capacity to support the new computer-based Common Core assessments and provide instructional tools that allow for more individual instruction.
- Leverage additional resources to improve the Common Core implementation process.

Revamping state education systems to meet the demands of the 21st century is a difficult endeavor and states must undertake the transition responsibly with fairness to students, families, and teachers. These recommendations chart a practical way that states and districts can realize the benefits of the Common Core and improve the quality of education for all students. This report provides examples of states or districts tackling each of the actions outlined by these recommendations.

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