



Teacher Leadership

The Pathway to Common Core Success

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Introduction and summary

The Common Core State Standards began in 2009 as a state-led effort to measure the nation's students against a shared benchmark. At first, the standards received broad acceptance. Education leaders and elected officials alike agreed that students and the U.S. education system would benefit from internationally competitive standards that guarantee common, rigorous learning goals for students across the nation. But as the standards rolled out—and as they continue to roll out—the Common Core has become a political football, so much so that some political pundits are predicting that it will be a significant issue for 2016 presidential hopefuls.¹

With all of the political posturing, it's easy to lose focus and pay little heed to the voices of the people most affected by the standards—teachers and students. States and districts face serious challenges as they continue the transition to the Common Core, and some places are experiencing more success than others. Yet while the Common Core may continue to be litigated in state houses throughout the country and while national politicians may use it as a political wedge, teachers are hard at work implementing the standards each day. As such, teachers' voices on Common Core implementation are vitally important to its success.

This report describes districts throughout the country that have taken collaborative approaches between management and unions to ensure that teachers have significant voice and leadership in implementation of the Common Core. In many cases, these collaborative approaches are not new. Districts and unions across the country—many of them profiled in this report—have been working together to involve teachers in meaningful ways for decades, but these systems have taken on new importance with the rollout of the Common Core.

The districts in this report vary in size, location, student demographics, socio-economic status, and student academic performance, but all have worked to give teachers a meaningful voice in decision making during the implementation of the Common Core. The districts include: Baltimore City Public Schools in Baltimore, Maryland; Georgetown Exempted Village Schools in Georgetown, Ohio; Marquardt School District 15 in Glendale Heights, Illinois; Poway Unified School District in San Diego, California; San Juan Unified School District in Carmichael, California; and Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada.

While the specifics and nature of their individual collaborative systems vary, similar types of teacher leadership opportunities are available in each district. These opportunities include:

- **Teachers involved in district- and school-level governance.** In the profiled districts, teachers serve on school, district, and union governing bodies as a way to ensure that teachers' perspectives are included in decisions made about the standards and other district priorities.
- **Teachers on special assignment.** Under this arrangement, teachers have the option of leaving the classroom and working for the district or union, allowing them to support practicing teachers as well as students.
- **Teachers in leadership roles who still actively practice in the classroom.** Districts place teachers in leadership positions to help with Common Core transition, while still giving them the chance to teach in the classroom for at least part of the school day.

Teachers in the profiled districts identified the following key areas that they were able to affect positively as a result of the leadership opportunities described above:

- **Professional development.** Teachers have had the opportunity to direct their own professional learning and to get approval and assistance from teacher leaders. Teachers identified this practice as an important factor in Common Core implementation.
- **Time for collaboration.** Teachers have more control over how best to use the time afforded to them by the district for collaboration around the needs of the Common Core. In several districts, teachers determine how to spend collaborative time, and teacher leaders assist in the planning of how the time will be used.

"I think it's important that teachers are leading the Common Core effort because you're going to get buy-in if it starts with the teachers. The teachers are the closest to the students. This is all to help student achievement."

– Dana Galvin, president, Washoe Education Association²

- **Writing, developing, and choosing instructional materials.** Teachers are involved in the production and selection process of instructional materials aligned to the Common Core.

Based on interviews and observations of the teachers in the districts described in this report, the Center for American Progress makes the following recommendations to districts implementing the standards:

- Create teacher leadership roles at the classroom, school, and district levels.
- Allocate time for teachers to collaborate.
- Create systems for embedded teacher professional development.
- Give teachers an active role in the selection and development of Common Core instructional materials.

The effectiveness of differing approaches when it comes to the implementation of the Common Core will not fully be known until student growth and academic achievement can be assessed over time. That being said, it is clear that no matter what the approach, teacher involvement will be crucial to the success of the Common Core. This report therefore focuses on collaborative approaches to address the implementation of the Common Core. As studies show, formal partnerships between unions, administrators, and teachers help improve student learning, which is the ultimate goal of the Common Core.³ The collaborative district systems highlighted in this report demonstrate that management and unions can effectively work together to involve teachers in creating environments where teachers feel prepared and supported to implement the standards with fidelity so that they can prepare all students to succeed in college or careers.

Methodology

From September 2014 to January 2015, CAP staff conducted listening and learning sessions in five of the six school districts mentioned above and conducted phone interviews with Georgetown Exempted Village Schools. CAP partnered with the Teacher Union Reform Network, or TURN, to identify leading districts that provide opportunities for teacher input in the decision-making process in Common Core implementation. In some of the districts investigated, the teachers union and school administration had been effectively partnering for decades, while others were in the early stages of collaboration. Our research focused on how teachers are participating in governance at the district and school levels. CAP staff observed teachers building and leading their own professional development, acquiring and adapting resources, and leading committees concerned with everything from school safety to instruction to budget. The creation of these opportunities is the result of strong partnerships between union and district officials and teachers and administrators at the school level.

The information, data, and descriptions of various district-specific programs collected for this report were obtained through interviews with district leaders, school administration, and teachers, as well as through observation during classroom and professional-development sessions. Each district profiled in this report is approaching implementation of the Common Core in a unique way and is in a different phase of the process.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

