



Teacher Leadership

The Pathway to Common Core Success

By Andrew Amore, Nichole M. Hoeflich, and Kaitlin Pennington

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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.

District information

This report focuses on six districts that utilize labor-management collaboration to empower teachers in supporting Common Core implementation. Each district varies in size, location, student demographics, and academic achievement. Table 1 below provides a snapshot of each district. While each district serves a unique demographic, the authors found that all of them put teachers in leadership roles and gave them authority to support Common Core implementation. Some districts had formal systems in place that included teachers in this process prior to the adoption of the Common Core, while others recognized the need for increased teacher involvement and created new systems to better aide in the transition after the adoption of the Common Core.

Our research highlighted the fact that each district established unique timelines for reaching full implementation of the Common Core. Table 2 below outlines the timelines for each district. While districts are currently at different phases of the process, the common thread remains that teachers have been involved in the full rollout process for the standards.

TABLE 1
District profiles

	Baltimore City Public Schools	Georgetown Exempted Village Schools	Marquardt School District 15	Poway Unified School District	San Juan Unified School District	Washoe County School District
Location	Baltimore, Maryland	Georgetown, Ohio	Glendale Heights, Illinois	San Diego, California	Carmichael, California	Reno, Nevada
Enrollment	87,730	1,009	2,773	35,498	49,035	64,740
Teachers	6,356	62	196	1,697	2063	3,709
Schools	188 schools	2 schools	5 schools	39 schools	66 schools	99 schools
Racial and ethnic demographics						
White	8.0%	95.3%	21.1%	49.0%	59.6%	46.4%
Black	85.0%	1.4%	12.5%	2.4%	7.9%	2.4%
Hispanic or Latino	5.0%	1.0%	51.7%	14.2%	21.1%	38.9%
Asian	1.0%	N/A	12.0%	24.9%	6.1%	4.4%
Multiracial	N/A	1.7%	2.3%	8.9%	3.1%	5.4%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	N/A	N/A	0.5%	0.2%	1.1%	1.6%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.4%	0.9%	N/A
English language learners	3.9%	N/A	23.0%	11.7%	10.7%	15.9%
Eligible for free and reduced-price lunches	83.8%	58.9%	75.0%	14.8%	50.7%	47.7%
Academic achievement (proficiency rates on state assessments)						
School year	2013-14	2013-14	2013-14	2012-13	2012-13	2013-14
Fourth-grade reading	68%	89%	53%	88%	63%	71%
Fourth-grade math	53%	76%	65%	88%	67%	75%
Eighth-grade reading	55%	89%	47%	78%	60%	58%
Eighth-grade math	28%	82%	56%	34% * General mathematics	25% * General mathematics	42%

* For eighth-grade math in the Poway and San Juan districts, math proficiency was broken down by course. We listed the proficiency for general mathematics.

Notes: For the sources used to compile district profiles, see the Appendix. Academic achievement data in California were not publicly available for the 2013-14 school year.

TABLE 2

Common Core implementation timeline

Baltimore City Public Schools⁴

Adopted Common Core: June 22, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Introduced Common Core to school leaders and teachers and provided them with professional development. Began building pre-K-12 literacy plan and mathematics plan.

2011-12 school year: Gathered data on Common Diagnostics Assessments for Literacy. Continued professional development for Common Core standards in math and continued to build mathematics plan.

2012-13 school year: Delivered instructional models for pre-K-12 literacy and mathematics to teachers.

2013-14 school year: Continued efforts to shift curricula to align with the Common Core and provided professional development to teachers and school leaders.

2014-15 school year: Continued efforts to shift curricula to align with the Common Core and to provide professional development to teachers and school leaders.

Georgetown Exempted Village Schools

Adopted Common Core: June 18, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Began review of new standards to better understand the new learning objectives.

2011-12 school year: Received materials from the state to support Common Core implementation.

Created a 10-month planning calendar and carefully examined the standards to look for overlap between the old and new standards.

2012-13 school year: Started full Common Core implementation for nontested subjects. Continued the work of evaluating the standards and worked toward Common Core alignment in English language arts and mathematics.

2013-14 school year: Piloted Common Core standards in English language arts and mathematics.

2014-15 school year: While continuing to pilot the Common Core standards, teachers are working to rewrite unit plans in English language arts and mathematics to better align with the Common Core.

Marquardt School District 15

Adopted Common Core: June 24, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Began to create teams of teachers to study the adopted standards and supporting documents.

2011-12 school year: Teams of district leaders and teachers continued the evaluation and study of the standards and began to write curricula.

2012-13 school year: Began initial implementation of the Common Core, piloting the standards in English language arts and mathematics.

2013-14 school year: Continued efforts to implement the standards, with ongoing revisions.

2014-15 school year: Continued efforts to support implementation, with revisions and teacher support.

Poway Unified School District⁵

Adopted Common Core: August 2, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Began review of the Common Core to better understand the new learning objectives.

2011-12 school year: Team of elementary teachers developed and implemented district-wide staff-development modules to support understanding of the standards, prompts, and rubrics aligned to Common Core writing standards.

2012-13 school year: Elementary schools began full implementation of the writing standards aligned to the Common Core. Teams of elementary school teachers started their review of Common Core math standards.

2013-14 school year: At the elementary level, the district provided targeted support to schools to implement the mathematics standards. Implementation of the writing standards continued. The district began to review the reading standards and started to align professional learning with building understanding of the Common Core. Teachers in elementary and secondary schools began work to align standards with special-education classes and professional-learning opportunities for special-education teachers. At the secondary level, teachers and district leaders began to review the mathematics and literacy standards across all disciplines.

2014-15 school year: At the elementary level, schools are implementing the math standards with district support and revision. The district continues to improve the implementation of the writing standards. Teachers are reviewing the reading and early literacy standards. At the secondary level, the mathematics standards are being implemented for the sixth and seventh grades. In grades 8-12, teachers continue to review the math standards and to prepare for their implementation. In all grades, teachers have begun to implement the Common Core literacy standards with district support. Special-education teachers continue professional learning around the Common Core and are working to differentiate course material aligned to the Common Core to meet the needs of their students.

San Juan Unified School District⁶

Adopted Common Core: August 2, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Began review of new instructional shifts embedded within the standards to gain a better understanding of the new learning objectives for grades K-12. District leaders and teachers focused on understanding the pedagogy behind the Common Core standards, including comprehensive, balanced literacy. The district held workshops to provide a deeper understanding of the standards for teachers and school leaders.

2011-12 school year: Continued to focus on the pedagogy within the instructional shifts and introduced the standards in English language arts and mathematics. Elementary schools implemented literacy, student voice and discussion strategies, and writing standards. Secondary schools implemented literacy across English language arts and social studies content areas, student voice and discussion strategies, and balanced math standards.

2012-13 school year: In elementary schools, teachers focused on gaining a deeper understanding of balanced literacy, writing, and student voice and discussion strategies. There was an increased focus on the instructional shift of making meaning out of the texts, which entails helping students gain a deeper level of comprehension of complex texts. In secondary schools, English language arts teachers focused on understanding depth of knowledge, disciplinary literacy, and writing across all content areas within the standards.

2013-14 school year: The district shifted the focus from the pedagogical instructional shifts to the specific Common Core standards. Some teachers began to pilot standards and lessons aligned to the Common Core standards in all content areas. Professional development at the school and district levels focused on understanding the structure and content of the new standards.

2014-15 school year: In elementary schools, teachers focused on literacy, with an emphasis on critical thinking and writing; expository science; and social science texts. In secondary schools, teachers developed units, lessons, and assessments aligned to the Common Core across all content areas. District wide, select teachers began to identify and develop units, lessons, and assessments aligned to the Common Core in all content areas. These materials were then vetted by select teachers in classrooms across the district.

Washoe County School District

Adopted Common Core: June 22, 2010.

2010-11 school year: Began review of new standards to gain a better understanding of the new learning objectives.

2011-12 school year: Full implementation of the Common Core in English language arts for grades K-8 and in mathematics for grades K-2.

2012-13 school year: Began full Common Core implementation in all English language arts classrooms and partial implementation of standards in math.

2013-14 school year: Continued full Common Core implementation in English language arts and partial implementation in math.

2014-15 school year: Continued full Common Core implementation in English language arts and math.

Research and context about labor-management collaboration

The Common Core State Standards are more rigorous than past academic standards and require students to demonstrate advanced thinking and problem-solving skills that were not previously central to many state academic standards. As a result, many facets of instruction need to adapt to achieve the new standards, including classroom instruction, professional development, leadership opportunities for teachers, and the relationship between teachers unions and school administration. For successful Common Core implementation and general school improvement, a systems-level approach is necessary. Some districts are finding that taking unified and collaborative approaches to operating school systems is not only an effective path to successful Common Core implementation but also an opportunity to position the education system to meet the demands of 21st century learning.

Throughout the previous century, practice-embedded decisions—such as the content of instructional materials and professional-development opportunities—were controlled by school districts, while unions representing teachers negotiated for bread-and-butter issues such as wages, benefits, and due process. This division tracks an industrial model of organization that still largely remains the status quo between school districts and unions in most places. However, some districts are moving to systems that share decision making with unions and that seek to provide more opportunities for teachers to have a meaningful voice.⁷ This approach requires a great deal of commitment, time, capacity building, and practice to learn new ways of working together. However, the benefits of such an effort can be the creation of environments that are built on foundations of trust, communication, cooperation, and accountability to one another, which research has proven to be successful in enriching academic achievement.⁸

Researchers have been studying organizational change in private industry for decades but have recently begun to analyze and show positive results from collaborative system reform in education. Increasingly, districts that have committed to organizational change are finding that change through collaboration is a key source of their success. Among the many case studies, districts such as Cincinnati Public Schools in Ohio; Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida; Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts; and ABC Unified School District in California—although they are not included among the six districts profiled in this report—have used effective labor-management partnerships to make and sustain gains in student achievement.⁹ In a study of 20 of the world’s most improved school systems, management consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that what separated the best of these from the rest were formal structures of interaction among teachers and school leadership.¹⁰

The significance and importance of union-management partnerships are now becoming part of the national conversation on school reform. The work around teacher and management collaboration has been supported by a number of major foundations; the U.S. Department of Education; and representative organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the School Superintendents Association, and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The work of these agencies, organizations, and foundations resulted in four national convenings that focused on transforming the teaching profession and on effective Common Core implementation through labor-management collaboration.¹¹ This dedicated group of agencies, organizations, and foundations continues to work together as the Common Core is debated. Furthermore, networks such as the Teachers Union Reform Network and the Consortium for Educational Change have grown over the years to include more districts that are involved in sharing best practices and technical assistance in support of this work.¹²

Models for teacher leadership and empowerment

While each district studied for this report had a different system, leaders in each district formalized ways of empowering teachers and giving them a voice in the implementation of the Common Core standards. The districts studied and their respective teachers unions were able to reach agreements that allowed for increased teacher involvement in school- and district-wide decision making. As schools are under increased pressure to increase student performance and to prepare more students for college and careers, imparting systematic teacher leadership opportunities allows teachers to develop the skills they need to be positive leaders who can influence effective change in schools.¹³ The following section outlines various ways that the six study districts engaged and empowered their teachers.

Teachers involved in district- and school-level governance

In some districts, teachers serve on school, district, and union governing bodies to ensure that teacher perspective is included in decisions made about the Common Core and other district priorities. Examples of this type of collaboration include the following.

Joint Governing Panel, Baltimore City Public Schools

In Baltimore City Public Schools, union members and district leaders work together to make district-wide decisions by serving on the Joint Governing Panel, or JGP. The JGP is an eight-member committee comprised of four district-appointed members and four union-appointed members. Committee members—who are former teachers—work full time in their roles on projects that include creating professional-development opportunities for teachers and managing a four-tier career pathway movement for standard, professional, model, and lead teachers. This movement was established in their 2011 bargaining agreement.¹⁵

“Common Core has really been an eye-opening experience for me as a teacher. Part of the reason is it’s allowed me to gain a lot of freedom in what I teach my students. It’s not just about lecture and notes and graphic organizers, but it’s about real-world stuff and having discussions.”

– *Mario Fitzpatrick, social studies teacher, McQueen High School, Washoe County School District*¹⁴

The JGP works under the leadership of a Joint Oversight Committee, or JOC, made up of district and union leadership that oversee the operations and implementation of the teacher agreement.

Teaching and Learning Cooperative and Teaching and Learning Steering Committee, Poway Unified School District

The Poway Unified School District has a long history of labor-management collaboration, which over time has established a number of committees and teams that bring district and union leadership together to make decisions. Two of these committees have been particularly active in supporting the Common Core transition. The Teaching and Learning Cooperative, or TLC, focuses on providing professional development to teachers. The aim of the TLC is to allow teachers to self-direct the professional development they need to improve their practice.¹⁶ To that end, teachers can opt to write proposals for professional-learning programs. The proposals are evaluated by four teachers who sit on the joint District/Federation Professional Development Advisory Board and are responsible for approving professional-learning programs. When approved, teachers lead the professional-learning opportunities at either site-based or district-wide sessions. The TLC has been in place in the district since 2003, but since the adoption of the Common Core in 2010, more professional-development sessions have been geared toward supporting teachers while they continue to engage the Common Core.

Other committees within the Poway Unified School District have formed directly in response to the adoption of the Common Core. The Teaching and Learning Steering Committee formed in 2013 to make recommendations to the district superintendent's cabinet regarding Common Core adoption.¹⁸ The committee works to “develop teacher leadership, build capacity at the school site level, [and] support collaboration and on-going professional learning for all educators to support the implementation of the standards and to ensure student learning.”¹⁹

Site Leadership Team, or SLT, San Juan Unified School District

In the San Juan Unified School District, the union and district leadership enacted Article 24 within their bargaining agreement, which requires all schools in the district to involve teachers in school governance.²⁰ Under the terms of the contract, each district school can independently determine how it will implement Article

“It is teachers’ own self-driven professional learning. Part of the TLC is not only going to the session and collaborating with your colleagues, but there is also a portion where you actually implement the work into your classroom as well.”

– Kimberlie Rens, executive director of Learning Support Services, Poway Unified School District¹⁷

24 and empower teachers in school leadership. At one school, Encina Preparatory High School, school leaders embraced teacher leadership by creating a teacher-led school.²¹ Instead of the building principal making all decisions and disseminating information to teachers, the SLT, which is made up of five teachers, the principal, and three vice principals, works to make all site-based decisions. No decisions are made without full SLT discussion.

District Leadership Team, Georgetown Exempted Village Schools

Georgetown Exempted Village Schools adjusted its model of district leadership to incorporate more teacher voice by forming a District Leadership Team comprised of four district leaders and eight teachers. The teachers who serve on the District Leadership Team complete an application and interview process with district and union leadership to become part of the team. The district superintendent and the president of the Georgetown Federation of Teachers—the union that represents teachers—work together to give responsibilities to teacher leaders on the District Leadership Team. These responsibilities include developing the district’s improvement plan, which includes target strategies and goals; ensuring that teachers are provided with relevant professional development; and supporting the implementation of strategies and curricula, such as those aligned to the Common Core.²² Through the District Leadership Team, teachers are actively engaged in the decision-making process for their schools.

Teachers on Special Assignment

To capitalize on the experience, perspective, and knowledge of their most expert teachers, several districts created full-time district positions for teachers, known as Teachers on Special Assignment, or TOSA. Teachers selected for this assignment leave the classroom to work for the district or union, with the goal of supporting teacher practice. The process of becoming a TOSA differs by district but largely involves an application process, interviews with district and union leadership, panel reviews, and classroom observations. Likewise, the criteria for applying to become a TOSA in each district differ, but in general, the process is designed to ensure that TOSAs are teachers with proven records of success. While this practice looks different in each district, a common thread is that all TOSAs serve as liaisons between practicing teachers and schools and between the union and districts.

Content area program coordinator, Washoe County School District

In the Washoe County School District, teachers apply for temporary TOSA positions to focus on developing instructional materials within specific grades and subjects; these teachers are known as program coordinators. Through their work with practicing teachers, TOSAs are given high levels of autonomy to create and implement work that they identify as being high need in the district. When the Common Core—which informed the Nevada Academic Content Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics—rolled out in Nevada in the 2011-12 school year, several of the TOSAs in Washoe stepped forward to support the effort. In their work, they broke down and learned the new standards and then met with and supported teachers throughout the district as adoption occurred. Washoe also utilized the support of pre-existing implementation specialists, who were teacher leaders already working in most elementary schools across the district. Under a comprehensive professional-learning plan, content area program coordinators worked with implementation specialists to build their professional competencies on an ongoing basis. The implementation specialists then developed professional competencies for site-based staff.

Math TOSAs and math coaches, Poway Unified School District

In Poway Unified schools, district leaders decided to prioritize implementation of the mathematics standards as a way of gradually rolling them out. To support these efforts, three one-year TOSA positions in math were created to assist teachers at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels in the district. To provide additional support in mathematics for elementary school teachers, five full-time teachers were released from their classroom duties to serve as elementary math coaches. Math coaches and TOSAs coordinate professional development and support practicing teachers in their Common Core implementation efforts.

Instructional resource specialist, Marquardt School District 15

In Marquardt School District 15, two former teachers currently serve at the district level, filling the position of instructional resource specialist to support instruction in math and literacy efforts. The individuals holding the instructional resource posts act as mediators between the district and teachers and work to maintain communication between both sides. During Common Core implemen-

“I think success comes from the funding and the opportunity for districts to create positions like the TOSA program coordinator. The people in these positions then provide professional development in a collaborative way that helps all teachers learn and implement the Common Core well.”

– Temoca Dixon, seventh-grade social studies teacher, Archie Clayton Middle School, Washoe County School District²³

tation, the instructional resource specialist-assigned teachers led teams of practicing teachers focused on unpacking grade-level standards and writing unit plans that aligned with the Common Core.

Teachers in leadership roles who still actively practice in the classroom

Many districts pull effective teachers out of the classroom to enable them to focus on supporting other teachers. However, some districts have found ways to incorporate teacher leadership opportunities while keeping effective teachers in the classroom. Teachers filling the dual role of peer mentoring and classroom instructor emphasized that because they are still on the ground implementing the standards each day, they have more credibility with their colleagues.

Lead teachers, Baltimore City Public Schools

In 2010, the Baltimore Teachers Union and Baltimore City Public Schools entered into a new collective bargaining agreement that included increased leadership opportunities for practicing teachers. The new agreement established a Career Pathways program for teachers with four levels: standard, professional, model, and lead. Teachers work to gain achievement units, or AUs, which allow them to progress along the pathway. However, beyond earning AUs, all teachers must go through a peer-review process before advancing to another level on the career pathway. When teachers reach the level of lead teacher, they take on a position within a school to support a specific investment area such as coaching teachers, collating student data, or planning professional development. Working collaboratively with the principal, lead teachers spend up to 25 percent of their day teaching; the other time is spent on investment-area activities.

Instructional cadres, Marquardt School District 15

As the Common Core took effect in Marquardt School District 15, the instructional resource specialists in the district compiled two groups of practicing teachers, one for math and one for English language arts, to serve on the instructional cadres. By forming the cadres, the district utilized the expertise of teachers still practicing in the classroom. The cadres began their work in 2011 by closing,

“Some people have said that I should go on and be a coach somewhere, but if I did that, I’m going to lose that credibility with other teachers. Because when you’re in the trenches and you still have to do the classroom part and work with parents and do the grades, you have so much more power and credibility with other teachers.”

– Katy Scherr, third-grade teacher, Caughlin Ranch Elementary School, Washoe County School District²⁴

dissecting, and studying the Common Core. After gaining a clear understanding of the new standards, the cadres expanded to incorporate more teachers to develop and write Common Core-aligned instructional materials. Because the teachers who served on the cadres were also practicing teachers, they also served as Common Core transition leaders within their schools. Other teachers can approach members of the cadres to provide feedback or to seek support with the implementation of the Common Core in their classrooms.

Common Core teacher leaders, Poway Unified School District

At the high schools in the Poway Unified School District, one or two classroom teachers teach one less period per day to support their colleagues' work in the implementation of the Common Core standards. Each elementary school has two professional-learning teacher leaders who are paid a stipend to supplement their work. Elementary and high school teacher leaders are brought together once per month, or as needed, by district leadership to support their site work. Because these teacher leaders are still in the classroom, they are able to develop professional-learning opportunities specific to their site needs.

District Leadership Team and teacher-led task forces, Georgetown Exempted Village Schools

As indicated above, the District Leadership Team is made up of practicing teachers and district leaders. Together, teachers and district leaders make district-wide decisions. The district also is comprised of five task force groups that address district-specific needs, including instruction, enrollment, personalized learning, development, and communications.²⁵ The various task forces are made up entirely of teachers who also maintain a full-time teaching schedule. The teacher leader of the task force applies for the position and is chosen by district leadership. After selection, other teachers are asked if there are task forces on which they wish to serve. Any teacher that expresses interest is placed on a team under the task force leaders. Teachers on each task force receive a small stipend for their work. These task forces work on issues in their relevant area and report their work back to the District Leadership Team.

Teacher leaders and Common Core implementation

The districts in this report utilized the above collaborative approaches when rolling out the Common Core to schools and teachers. In some cases, the conversion to Common Core fit nicely into existing systems. In other instances, districts needed to adapt their systems or create new systems so that teachers could be directly involved in the implementation process. Union and district leaders recognized that because of the newness and vast scope of the work, they needed teachers to be more closely involved in the process and in greater communication with other teachers and district leaders than ever before. In all cases, however, these districts provided—and continue to provide—teachers a space to voice their opinions and have direct influence on several important areas of teacher practice throughout the Common Core shifts. Specifically, teachers in the studied districts identified several key areas in which they were able to have direct input in Common Core implementation.

Professional development

By most accounts, professional development for teachers is broken. Far too often, teachers report experiencing short-term, episodic, and disconnected professional-learning opportunities, while research shows that high-quality professional-learning opportunities for teachers must be collaborative and embedded into daily practice.²⁶ The exact structure of professional learning will differ depending on the needs of the teacher, school, and district. However, themes emerged in how teachers' voices are being included in the types of professional-learning activities teachers report that they need in order to implement the Common Core effectively. Once teachers identify their needs, the professional-development offerings are led by other teachers in the district who excel in that particular area or by a community of teachers in the district. In addition, at times, university partners are brought in to aide in the delivery of professional-development courses—as are proven outside experts who develop professional-development courses targeted to teacher-identified needs.

“We see all of the work related to Common Core as professional development. There is a big shift in the roles of teachers now and the expectations, the knowledge, [and] the skills teachers need to have. It is far more demanding today than ever before.”

– Jerry O’Shea, assistant superintendent of instructional services, Marquardt School District 15²⁷

Teacher-created professional development, Baltimore City Public Schools

Teachers in Baltimore City Public Schools can determine the needs of their professional development and create professional-development courses that directly address their needs. Once they create the course, teachers submit a professional-development proposal to the Joint Governing Panel for approval. If approved, teachers can offer their course to other teachers in the district and earn achievement units for giving or taking the course. AUs are part of the Career Pathways program in the district. As teachers gain AUs, they work their way through the career pathway, earning more responsibility and compensation. Leading and attending professional development is just one way to earn AUs in the district. Teachers can also submit before- and after-school projects with students to earn AUs, take district-approved university classes, and engage in several other activities that the district and union approve as improving teachers' knowledge and skills.

Teaching and Learning Cooperative, Poway Unified School District

The Teaching and Learning Cooperative is a voluntary program of professional development that is aligned with the California guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB, to improve student learning by providing a program for continuous professional learning.²⁹ Similar to the system in Baltimore City Public Schools, Poway teachers write and submit their own professional-learning proposals based on the needs that they self-identify. Teacher leaders in the district, university partners, or outside experts lead the professional development that teachers self-identify as areas for growth. These courses are offered at times that work best for teachers' schedules, and teachers receive credits that can lead to greater earning potential. Titles of professional development offered through the Teaching and Learning Cooperative include "Collaborative Common Core Math Unit Planning" and "Building Math Talk Strategies to Support the Common Core Standards."³⁰

"The spirit behind professional activities and AU projects is [that] teachers who have been engaged in various student-focused activities in the past are now awarded for those entrepreneurial ideas that have impacted student achievement."

– Kenya Campbell, City Schools associate with the Joint Governing Panel, Baltimore City Public Schools²⁸

Core Task Implementation Project, or CTiP, Washoe County School District

CTiP began as a professional-development session for literacy teachers in grades K-6. Schools self-select into CTiP and meet for a half day once per month throughout the academic year to examine and discuss the Common Core standards and research that supports them. During the half-day sessions, teachers review vetted Common Core lessons and materials that they can then use in their classrooms. The teachers engage in professional learning matched to the standards, review and plan instructional materials, and examine pedagogical shifts that support the implementation of the new resources. During CTiP, teachers also share personal and student feedback with district stakeholders, such as TOSAs, to inform future district learning opportunities.

Teacher and district collaboration

Lessons learned from high-performing nations show that effective education systems include structures and time for teachers to learn to teach effectively and collaboratively.³² Teachers need more time in the school day to reflect, plan, and observe effective teachers, as well as to collaborate, practice, and develop their teaching craft. The shift to the Common Core has only increased teachers' need for time for these activities. Through the formal modes of communication set in place by the districts and unions studied for this report, teachers voiced their need for more time and took active control over how to best use the time afforded to them. In many cases, teachers and district officials have worked together to find more time throughout the year to work on Common Core implementation. Many districts put aside time throughout the year to work collaboratively with teachers, but these districts are intentional about the time allotted, and they structure it to directly impact Common Core implementation.

Summer academy and weekly collaborative time, Marquardt School District 15

Instructional resource specialists lead a summer academy, where teachers have time to reflect and plan for Common Core implementation. In addition, the district dismisses students one hour early once per week to provide teachers time to collaborate around the needs of the Common Core. Instructional resource specialists also help direct how this weekly collaborative time is used.

“School districts can support teachers by giving us the opportunity to have input into the types of trainings we need. This helps PD [professional development] become more beneficial for teachers because it meets the particular needs they have.”

– Myra Monroy, middle school math Teacher on Special Assignment, Poway Unified School District³¹

Weekly early release, Washoe County School District

Recognizing the need for additional time for collaboration, the Washoe County School District adjusted its academic calendar to institute a weekly early release for students every Wednesday. This weekly time is designated for professional-development sessions and collaborative planning. Principals and site-based TOSAs work together to plan professional-development sessions held during this time. These sessions are optional for teachers, who can also opt to use the time to meet and collaborate with their Professional Learning Committee.

Additional daily preparation time, San Juan Unified School District

Recently, teachers in the San Juan Unified School District were given two preparation periods per day instead of one. The district changed school scheduling to allow one full period to be used for collaboration. Also, teacher leaders have an extra preparation period—meaning that they have three preparation periods in total—to complete their additional work and to support the work of other teachers at their schools.

Writing, developing, and choosing resources and instructional materials

Evidence shows that the choice of curricula and instructional materials is a major influence on student learning, which is as large or larger than the well-documented effect of teacher quality. For example, a recent study of second-grade math curricula found that students using one set of materials scored higher in mathematics than students using a different set of materials. The effect of the specific teaching materials used is greater than the effect of having a teacher at the 75th percentile of effectiveness—in the top 25 percent of math teachers—teaching the class.³⁴ Yet many curricula and instructional materials have not been studied, and others have not been fully aligned to the Common Core. Recognizing this fact, many of the districts profiled in this report strategically used teacher leaders to develop, adapt, and select resources and instructional materials aligned to the Common Core.

“I would say that we really are in need of more time and resources to implement the Common Core. And I think that doesn’t just mean time in terms of years, but it also means time in the day for professional development, time for us to be reflective on our practices, more time to be able to communicate effectively with parents.”

– Christine Cloutier, English language learner program coordinator, Poway Unified School District³³

Math teacher leads choose instructional materials, Poway Unified School District

Instead of district leadership choosing the materials aligned to the Common Core and disseminating them to teachers in the traditional top-down approach, math teachers in the Poway Unified School District are leading the selection effort of the mathematics instructional materials aligned to the Common Core. Math teaching teams, or teacher leads, across schools are comparing Common Core-aligned materials from various sources. The teacher leads will share the insights, reflections, and suggestions of math teachers from all of the schools with the district prior to the selection of math instructional materials.

Instructional resource specialists lead teachers in writing instructional materials, Marquardt School District 15

The two district-level instructional resource specialists in Marquardt School District 15 convened groups of teachers to work collaboratively to develop unit plans and instructional materials aligned to the Common Core. The unit plans were then implemented in all schools with the support of the instructional resource specialists and teachers who worked on the development of the materials.

Instructional Task Force, Georgetown Exempted Village Schools

The Instructional Task Force is a teacher-led team of teachers that is charged with two major goals: aligning instructional materials to the Common Core standards and revising assessments to better align with them. The task force is working to create Common Core-aligned unit plans that will be available to all teachers. The task force is working to complete the unit plans by the end of the 2014-15 academic year, for implementation in 2015-16.

Common Core facilitators, San Juan Unified School District

Using California state funding, the San Juan Unified School District took 11 teachers out of classroom for one year to serve as Common Core facilitators. The teachers in this role were chosen through an application, interview, and observation process by the district and are tasked with supporting the district's efforts in developing and choosing Common Core-aligned instructional materials. The facilitators oversee 120 teachers district wide who are trained in the Common Core to create lessons and materials.

"The Common Core gives teachers more freedom to choose their resources for their students aside from resources they get from the district. They're standards, not a curriculum. I've seen a lot of growth in my students."

– Rhea Espedido, lead teacher, Liberty Elementary School, Baltimore City Public Schools³⁵

Recommendations

Interviews and observations from the six districts profiled in this report reveal important lessons for other districts to consider as they work to involve teachers in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations:

- **Create teacher leadership roles at the classroom, school, and district levels.**

Districts in this report clearly demonstrate that when teachers are involved in every aspect of the education governance pipeline, execution of the Common Core is likely to be more successful. The experience of teachers in implementing reforms gives them an invaluable perspective that can inform decisions at the classroom, school, and district levels. Districts should think strategically about how best to use teacher leaders to ensure that their expertise is fully and properly utilized. It is critical that districts give teacher leaders opportunities to grow in their careers and guard against taking them out of the classroom completely, particularly if they have a desire to continue to instruct students. Hybrid teacher leadership positions and teacher special-assignment positions, such as the ones highlighted in this report, are worth considering.

- **Allocate time for teachers to collaborate.** Teachers in all six districts stressed the importance of designating time for collaboration when implementing the Common Core. Collaboration time gives teachers the opportunity to support each other's work, share materials, and communicate with each other about the successes and challenges they experience throughout the implementation process. Due to formalized communication systems set in place by the districts and union leadership profiled, teachers had an avenue to voice their need for more time to aid in Common Core transition. Most districts responded by creating extra time each week for collaboration and, in some cases, created summer professional-development opportunities for teachers.

- **Create systems for embedded teacher professional development.** The implementation of the Common Core requires teachers to learn new instructional strategies to meet the demands of the new standards. Districts in this report use agreed-upon feedback loops as avenues for teachers to identify areas where they see the need for additional support. In some districts, teachers were able to design and implement their own professional-learning programs, which could be offered school or district wide. Districts should explore ways to incorporate teacher feedback and teacher-identified needs into their professional-development programs and offer opportunities for teachers to create and lead professional learning for their colleagues.
- **Give teachers an active role in the selection and development of Common Core instructional materials.** Instructional materials play a large role in student achievement, yet there are few vetted Common Core-aligned instructional materials available to districts. Teachers in the six districts highlighted in this report were deeply involved in the writing, development, and selection of instructional materials aligned to the Common Core. This involvement allowed teachers to take a more active role in the move to the Common Core and left them feeling more engaged with the resources they planned to use to implement the standards.

While these recommendations are directed at districts implementing the Common Core, there are many ways that states, national-level organizations, and the federal government can support the work of empowering teachers. They can continue to fund and extend the reach of networks such as the Teacher Union Reform Network and the Massachusetts Education Partnership so that together, more districts and unions can access resources, share best practices, and learn from each other's successes and failures.³⁶ Additionally, much of the successes in these districts have come in part from the extensive amount of time they have dedicated to the work: time for teachers to collaborate; time for teacher training; and time for collaborative capacity building for district and union personnel. Much of the funds used by these districts have been received through grants or one-time Common Core state funds. To continue and to grow this work, district leaders must think critically about how to prioritize the necessary time and adequate compensation for teachers who take on additional work.

Conclusion

When it comes to education, there is no shortage of new ideas. Any veteran teacher can remember a reform effort that vanished as quickly as it began. This back-and-forth pattern can undermine and weaken reform efforts before they have an opportunity to make a difference. Not only that, this fits-and-starts approach can break down the trust between teachers and administrators, particularly if they are not working collaboratively on reform efforts.

The Common Core, which among its attributes gives teachers a foundational direction and set of goals that will allow them to hone their instruction to lead students to being college and career ready, deserves a fair opportunity to succeed. As districts across the country work to implement the Common Core State Standards, they would be wise to provide teachers a significant voice and opportunities for input on implementation. When teachers are involved in taking on new reforms, they are more likely to see value in them, which in turn can make implementation smoother.

Not only that, but giving teachers a voice in the implementation process allows them to see value in continuing with the Common Core for student success. When asked what she would say if legislators took the Common Core away from her district, Jaclyn Giordano, a reading specialist at Black Hawk School in Marquardt School District 15, responded with alarm: “I would want to know why. Why are you doing this to our students? Because we have built a trusting relationship with them as we work toward more rigorous standards, and then to pull the carpet out from underneath them is not only making us lost, it’s making our students lost, and that’s not in their best interest.”³⁷

The success of the Common Core will not be fully known until student growth and academic achievement can be assessed over time, but teacher leadership and involvement throughout the implementation process will be vital as the standards are rolled out in states and districts across the country. Students, teachers, districts, and states need time to experience the change in teaching and learning that the Common Core requires before decisions are made about its success.

Appendix

District profile sources

The authors compiled the data in Table 1 from the sources listed below.

For Baltimore City Public Schools statistics, see Baltimore City Public Schools, “District-Wide Performance: 2013 School Profile” (2013), available at <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8048/DistrictDataProfile.pdf>. For test scores, see Baltimore City Public Schools, “School Effectiveness and Achievement,” available at <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/24385> (last accessed March 2015).

For Georgetown Exempted Village Schools statistics, see Ohio School Report Cards, “2013 - 2014 Report Card for Georgetown Exempted Village School District,” available at <http://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/Pages/District-Report.aspx?DistrictIRN=045377> (last accessed February 2015). For test scores, see Ohio School Report Cards, “Advanced Reports,” available at <http://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/Pages/Power-User-Reports.aspx> (last accessed March 2015). The authors used the following search criteria: test results, proficiency levels (district), 2013-2014 (school year), Georgetown Exempted Village Schools (district or community).

For Marquardt School District 15 statistics, see Illinois Report Card 2013-2014, “Marquardt SD 15,” available at <http://www.illinoisreportcard.com/District.aspx?districtId=19022015002> (last accessed February 2015). For test scores, see Illinois Report Card 2013-2014, “Marquardt SD 15: ISAT Performance Levels,” available at <http://www.illinoisreportcard.com/District.aspx?source=Trends&source2=PerformanceLevelsISAT&DistrictID=19022015002> (last accessed March 2015).

For Poway Unified School District statistics, see California Department of Education, “DataQuest,” available at <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/> (last accessed January 2015). The authors used the following search criteria: Search criteria: District and Student Demographics. For test scores, see California Department of Education, “2013 STAR Test Results,” Search criteria: San Diego (county), Poway Unified (district), available at <http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2013/SearchPanel.aspx> (last accessed March 2015).

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For Washoe County School District statistics, see Nevada Report Card, “Data Interaction,” Search criteria: 2013-2014 (year), Washoe (district), available at <http://www.nevadareportcard.com/di/main/demoprof> (last accessed January 2015). For test scores, see Nevada Department of Education, “Data Interaction for Nevada Report Card,” available at <http://www.nevadareportcard.com/di/main/assessment> (last accessed March 2015). The authors used the following search criteria: CRT (exam), 2013-2014 (year), Grade 4 and Grade 8 (grade), and Washoe (district).

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