A Research Agenda
For the Common Core State Standards

Center on Education Policy

General Project Description

CEP convened two meetings in 2013 to focus on the need for a more relevant and coordinated research agenda on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The theory of action behind the proposal was that the research agenda for the CCSS and aligned assessments should be informed not only by the interest areas of leading researchers, but also by the needs of policymakers and practitioners. In order to do that, the traditional roles, relationships, and incentives that have long kept researchers, policymakers, and practitioners huddled within their own silos will need to change. These meetings were meant to begin a dialogue among key stakeholders about how to work together to support a robust and timely research agenda for the CCSS that informs both policy and practice.

This project had four objectives:

- Bring together a group of leading researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to talk about their work and needs regarding research on the CCSS
- Identify the major policy and practice issues around implementation at this point and consider how research could help inform work on those issues
- Identify connection points and holes between the research agenda being developed for the CCSS and the needs of policymakers, practitioners, and advocates
- Create an opportunity for collective impact to maximize opportunities and mitigate challenges

CEP’s first meeting involved mostly researchers and took place in April 2013, just before the start of the AERA annual conference in San Francisco. Participants included leading researchers from organizations and universities such as the National Science Foundation, the National Academies, the American Institutes for Research, CRESST at UCLA, and Stanford, Michigan State, Harvard Universities. (See appendix for complete list.)

The second meeting was held in Washington, DC in late September 2013 and included researchers,
policymakers, and practitioners. Along with many of the researchers that attended the April meeting at AERA, this meeting also included policy and practitioner groups such as NGA, CCSSO, AASA, AFT, NASSP, NCES, SHEEO, and CGCS. (See appendix for complete list.)

Before the first meeting, CEP met with key policymakers and practitioner groups, listed below, to better understand their needs and opinions about how to develop a timely and actionable research agenda for the CCSS. Some of the organizations we talked with—especially the membership organizations—are more focused on implementation on the ground, while others are more focused on the politics of implementation and how to define a process for refining and maintaining the CCSS and related assessments over time. These groups included:

Alliance for Excellent Education; National Association of Secondary School Principals; National Association of Elementary School Principals; American Association of School Administrators; National Association of State Boards of Education; Council of Chief State School Officers; National Governors’ Association; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association; Council of the Great City Schools; National Education Association; American Federation of Teachers; offices of Sen. Harkin, Sen. Alexander, Congressman Klein, and Congressman Miller; the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; and the National Science Foundation.

CEP has put together this report to provide a general overview of what was learned from these meetings with key stakeholder groups. The report summarizes the key ideas and concerns discussed at both meetings and includes a set of recommendations to help guide further discussions about how to structure a more actionable and engaged research agenda for the CCSS.

The Current State of Research on the CCSS

While many organizations and foundations have supported the development of tools and resources to help states and districts prepare for and put into operation the CCSS, a formal research agenda—with objectives related to key stages of implementation of the CCSS—is still a work in progress. To date, the research that has been publicly shared on the implementation of the CCSS at either the state or district level has been limited, although groups such as CCSSO, AASA, and others have been conducting surveys and gathering information and data about implementation from their members.

At the state level, CEP has worked closely with policymakers to develop a targeted survey for state leaders and then issued reports based on the results about key aspects of state-level implementation and decision-making (http://cep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentTopicID=1). Education First and Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) also conducted a survey that focused on the status of state implementation plans (http://www.education-first.com/files/MovingForward_EF_EPE_020413_final.pdf).

Phi Delta Kappa International/Gallup issued their annual poll of public attitudes toward the public schools, which included some questions related to public knowledge and perception of the CCSS.
The AFT conducted a survey of its members to gauge support for the CCSS among teachers. Less is known about district implementation at this point. The Council of the Great City Schools has a research project underway in its 67 urban member districts, not all of which are in states that have adopted the CCSS. CGCS is trying to understand both the process and the outcomes of CCSS implementation—specifically, how the processes and fidelity of implementation affect outcomes. CGCS is working with researchers to define what district leaders want to know, what they want and need from research, and what research can tell them about outcomes for at-risk students, English language learners (ELLs), and other groups of students served by urban districts.

In addition, this winter CEP will develop and administer a survey to a nationally representative sample of district leaders to assess district-level implementation of the CCSS and the aligned assessments. This kind of descriptive survey research can be helpful to dispel rumors and “spin” about the challenges of implementation and/or the attitudes of local education leaders on the ground.

It is important that a robust research agenda address short, medium, and long-term research needs that will inform the work of schools, districts, and states. These needs should be determined with the involvement of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Based on the discussions we have had, the most pressing research needs fall into four major categories:

- Research to validate whether or not the standards in fact reflect college and career readiness
- Research in areas of the CCSS where experts have identified the knowledge base as thin (particularly language arts)
- Research to inform future revisions of the standards
- Research that measures the effectiveness of states’ and districts’ approaches to implement the standards

For this to happen, there must be a continued effort to bring researchers, practitioners, and policymakers together to better understand mutual needs and challenges. Clearly, stakeholders have great needs and high hopes for research that can support implementation of the English language arts and math standards, as well as the Next Generation Science Standards. Everyone involved in both meetings agreed that, unlike research on past reform efforts, a research agenda that tracks the arc of CCSS implementation should be rooted in the science of improvement, not just accountability. Meeting participants strongly agreed that the implementation of the Common Core has tremendous learning power and that the research community has a role to play in helping educators, policymakers, and the public understand what reasonable expectations and timelines would look like for this kind of reform effort. Likewise, participants had fairly consistent ideas about the key issues and major areas of interest that research should target to support policy concerns. There was widespread agreement that any opportunity for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to engage in thoughtful discussions about their work on the CCSS is both useful and important, but at this stage of implementation, there was no
consensus on how to structure or manage a “common” research agenda. That is perhaps the subject of future meetings and discussions on how to ensure a successful implementation of the CCSS in a majority of states.

Summary of Discussion Questions and Responses

To guide the discussions for both the April and September meetings, CEP worked with panelists to define a broad set of leading questions. These questions are shown below in bold and then followed by a summary of responses from meeting attendees. Please note that not all responses fit neatly into one category—there was plenty of overlap among the panel discussions. Also, responses have been edited to eliminate redundancy but kept as close to original form as possible.

As the CCSS are being implemented in schools and classrooms, what kinds of research and evidence will be most useful to policymakers and educators?

- Researchers agree that if the standards and assessments are to have the impact on public education that many feel is possible, there must be a continuum of research over a reasonable timeline that attempts to answer short, medium and long-term questions; looks at multiple areas and levels of reform; and involves a range of academic disciplines and research traditions. For that to happen, researchers, policymakers and practitioners will clearly need to rethink and recalibrate their traditional roles and relationships.

- Past experience has demonstrated the need to identify right now which aspects of the standards are “high-impact,” meaning that they have a clear and efficient impact on student learning, and to focus research on those aspects. For instance, research has found that a student’s ability to read and understand more complex texts is a high-impact indicator of future student performance. These high-impact aspects should be studied closely and used as levers for improvement and targets for professional development for teachers and school leaders.

- There was widespread agreement that CCSS research and evaluation should not only focus on student outcomes for accountability purposes, but should also demonstrate whether there has been a true shift in instructional practice in a majority of schools and classrooms. Research on instructional practice could provide information about student outcomes, the impact of the standards and assessments on classroom practice, and the impact of any related interventions on learning environments.

- Researchers are keenly focused on developing studies that look at the impact of teachers and what happens in the classroom. From the research perspective, the formative assessment data
that comes from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) will be especially important to understand exactly what is happening in the classroom and then make needed corrections or adjustments. The summative assessment data coming out of these consortia in two years will tell policymakers and the public what many of us already know—that many students are not meeting the level of performance that signals college and career readiness.

- **The great concern among researchers is that the focus on the need for summative data for accountability purposes will skew the conversation toward teacher evaluations and test scores—not classroom practice.** Without the formative data, teachers, principals, policymakers, and other stakeholders will never be able to understand what worked and what did not. Researchers expressed great concern that more states will opt out of the assessment consortia in favor of a cheaper test option, thereby eliminating the ability to provide formative information to improve classroom practice.

- **The research on implementation should first and foremost be useful, not punitive.** There is an obvious need for research—but teachers and administrators will need to both trust and interpret the research data for themselves and their students. This will be a new mindset to most teachers and education leaders.

- **Policymakers often focus on assessment data, which provides only limited information to practitioners.** The problem is that current assessment data is focused mostly on accountability, which is helpful to policymakers. However, it is not the kind of data teachers can use to improve classroom practice. **What is lacking is the kind of data and research that helps explain why some places are making progress and others are not. We need to understand not just what is happening but why.**

- **The research agenda should not ignore the idea that the CCSS has impact beyond K-12 education.** At some point we have to validate the college- and career-ready label and show that students are better prepared for the challenges of higher education and/or the workforce.

*What has past standards implementation taught researchers and policymakers about reform efforts like the Common Core? Can past research and experience help today’s policymakers and education leaders define more reasonable timelines and key indicators for implementation and success?*

- **Researchers should be considering the past, present, and future of the CCSS:**
  - **Past:** What have we learned from past efforts to set high standards? Did we get the standards right this time? Are they on target with regard to content and rigor?
  - **Present:** What can research do to help guide implementation?
Future: What kind of research do we need to do to understand the impact (or lack of impact) of standards in 5-10 years? The research agenda needs to be broad and integrated, with common constructs and metrics for cross-study comparisons.

- **Very little research was done on past standards implementation.** Most research focused on developing tools and assistance—few to no resources were devoted to studying and evaluating practice. This resulted in educators and policymakers missing a huge learning opportunity about how best to implement standards.

- High-stakes accountability systems and teacher evaluation systems that are based solely on test scores are not education reforms and can have a very negative impact on the implementation of the CCSS. Past efforts to implement standards reform have taught us that students and teachers have to be actively involved in and feel ownership of the implementation process so it becomes a learning process as well.

- The nation’s system of public education has a direct influence on implementation—research should not ignore the policies and activities of the system itself. Past research efforts did not do this and were lacking because of it. The lack of infrastructure and inconsistencies within the U.S. education system can’t be ignored because it will impact implementation.

- The CCSS is different from past standards-based reform efforts in that institutions of higher education are more involved. There is still room for much more involvement, but CEP survey reports show there are partnerships among K-12, higher education, and the business community in 13 states to support implementation of the CCSS, and in some states education agencies are partnering directly with institutions of higher education or with the state higher education agency.

- Unlike past efforts, the CCSS research agenda should include a cross-section of people and organizations involved in studying the standards, not just the traditional research institutions. This is hard because the research community is not good at sharing and aggregating knowledge. The different types of groups that do research are not learning enough from one another because nobody values or invests in synthesis work.

- If we want things to be different with these standards, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners will have to view implementation as an important learning process. As with the tech industry, the CCSS have to be viewed as experimentation based on a reasonable set of evidence that this approach will succeed. Within that approach, there must be room for failure and mid-course corrections and a reasonable set of expectations. This will be difficult considering the political context in which education reforms are carried out, but an effort should
still be made to set and communicate realistic expectations for stakeholders.
Education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners often find themselves at odds with their activities, goals, and timelines. Does the Common Core present the education community with an opportunity to rethink traditional roles and relationships and build partnerships among these groups that will more likely result in mutually supportive agendas?

- **We need to broaden our definition of what constitutes a credible research agenda.** Credible research is valued and trusted because it comes from rigorous and empirical study, and while it very important that the research community be respected for its insistence on rigor, it should also give some consideration to the needs of policymakers. While longitudinal studies cannot be done quickly, there are other forms of descriptive qualitative research that can effectively serve the short and medium-term needs of policymakers and practitioners in the field.

- **Researchers especially will need to resist the temptation to be overly critical of one another’s research—that can have a negative impact on policy.** One set of indicators will never tell the whole truth of what is happening with the CCSS. From the beginning, we need to define expectations that are based on a triangulation of evidence made up of multiple indicators that cut across a range of disciplines.

- **Social media and networks have an important role to place in how research gets shared and even developed.** Technology can be very effective in breaking down traditional silos that exist among researchers, educators, and policymakers.

- **School and district leaders often lack trust in research and how it will be used.** They want to ensure that research is not laden with consequences for teachers and administrators. They want research that supports their efforts and does not make them the target.

- **Research has an important role to play in helping to mitigate the initial fears and criticisms that will emerge as CCSS implementation continues and if student performance drops relative to their performance on prior state tests.** Traditionally, these types of policy concerns are not considered a priority among researchers. Collaborative partnerships that closely align the goals of all parties involved (teachers, school and community leaders, policymakers, and researchers) are highly desirable but still fairly uncommon.

- **Educators would value a “gold standard” kind of certification from researchers (akin to a LEED certified building) to help judge the quality of the myriad training, curriculum, and instructional materials that are being marketed to support CCSS.**
Many researchers and policymakers have talked about the need for an organization or coalition to play a leadership role in the development of a research agenda to support the Common Core. Does such an organization exist or could a coalition of stakeholders work together to serve this purpose?

- The fact that the federal government has not played a major role in evaluating or monitoring the impact of the CCSS implementation will impact the developing research agenda. Most researchers, policymakers, and practitioners feel there is no organization or coalition that (at this time) could guide the research agenda without numerous political challenges.

- Researchers agree there is a large need for research syntheses right now because there is no good way to aggregate the research being done across organizations and agencies. There has always been too much replication of effort in the research community, and now that funding is tighter than ever, there is a real need for synthesis work.

- There is great value in bringing researchers together with policymakers and practitioners and pushing research to be more practical for the field. This is hard to do, however, because the incentives for research, policy, and practice are so different.

- Although a common research agenda is not likely, a set of common principles or research questions could be valuable if those questions develop from the field and also respond to practitioner and policymaker needs.

- There is support for a yearly “emerging Issues” forum that allows researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to identify and potentially answer critical questions, talk about funding gaps, and explore reasonable partnerships.
Concerns and Needs of Policy and Practitioner Groups

The Need for Evidence. A lot of the work on the CCSS will stand or fall on politics. We know at this point that a strong majority of education leaders and teachers support the CCSS, but soon enough the same percentage of people will be looking for results and proof that the standards were the right way to go.

High Stakes Accountability. Unless the policy mindset around high-stakes accountability changes, teachers are likely to be afraid of how the data will or could be used against them or their students. In order for teachers and students to maximize the usefulness of the data, teachers and education leaders must be willing to take risks, but right now high-stakes accountability and prescriptive mandates thwart their risk-taking.

The Equity Gap. There is real and significant gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers in their ability to master the CCSS in the same amount of time. To support efforts to bridge the equity gap, research needs to focus on examples of school/district/community partnerships that are overcoming this gap so others can learn from them.

Special Populations. How the CCSS will impact low-income or at-risk students, ELL students, and students with disabilities is a big unknown. Nobody has really addressed the “opportunity to learn” aspects of the CCSS. Helping low-performing students bridge that gap has to be a priority if there is to be positive impact at scale.

State and District Leadership. Implementation varies widely in approach, thoroughness, and quality. Within states and districts, what approaches are most effective? What are the policy and political conditions that make implementation effective? What are the obstacles to effective implementation?

Communications/Outreach Research. Public support and political will is crucial to the success of the standards, but how do we know what the public knows and understands about the standards? How do we encourage political will? Short-term research is needed that allows the public to see and education leaders to talk about “wins” and “progress towards goals.”

Timelines and Expectations. For policymakers, the timelines for most research projects are not realistic to meet policy and advocacy needs. The research agenda needs to include short, medium and long-term studies that produce actionable information that can guide implementation over time.

The Fate of the Assessments. What happens with the assessments aligned to the CCSS in 2014-15 is perhaps the most important turning point for CCSS implementation. Part of the research agenda should focus on how to ensure that practitioners and the public understand the value of having common assessments across states that measure a range of student performance. Past experience (and research) has taught us that “what gets tested gets taught.”
**Needs of Superintendents.** Current concerns of superintendents around the CCSS focus much more on professional development and tools to guide implementation. Research is not a major area of focus. Costs are always an issue, so there is no guarantee that quality will win out when it comes to selecting which tools and materials to use.

**Needs of Principals.** There is a need to chunk implementation into manageable pieces and then manage expectations. The research/information needs of principals fall into three categories: aligning CCSS implementation to principles of school turnaround; putting literacy at the heart of the CCSS implementation; and changing instructional practice.

**Needs of Governors.** Research needs to happen on a timeline that is more aligned to policymakers. Major areas of interest include the following:

- **Validation of the “college- and career-ready” label.** Are students truly ready for the rigor of college and careers? What can be learned from studying data on retention, jobs, and similar outcomes?
- **Alignment of the CCSS with the state’s public and private postsecondary system.** How well do the standards align with the requirements and options of postsecondary institutions?
- ** Appropriateness of learning progressions and grade levels as defined by CCSS.** Are the standards on target? If not, how do we refine the standards?
- **General information and research about lessons learned.** What are we seeing at scale? How does a state make this work? What kind of partnerships are states engaging in with business and institutions of higher education?
Recommendations

Based on the information shared and discussed during the meetings and conversations conducted over the last year, CEP developed the following set of recommendations for a research agenda to support CCSS implementation:

1. Develop a research agenda for the CCSS that focuses on improvement as well as accountability.

   - The CCSS research agenda should include both formative and summative data, with indicators that focus on improving classroom practice, as well as accountability. Specifically, a robust research agenda should include these elements:

     ➢ Research to validate whether or not the standards do, in fact, reflect college and career readiness
     ➢ Research in areas of the CCSS where the knowledge base is thin (particularly language arts)
     ➢ Research that focuses on “high-impact” predictive indicators that can clearly and efficiently identify the impact of the CCSS on student achievement and engagement
     ➢ Research that measures how the CCSS impacts the teaching and learning needs of students with disabilities
     ➢ Research that measures how the CCSS impacts the teaching and learning needs of at-risk students
     ➢ Research to inform future revisions of the standards; and implementation research that measures the effectiveness of states’ and districts’ approaches to implement the standards

   In addition, the following data would help policymakers and education leaders communicate about the CCSS and its impact on teaching and learning.

     ➢ Qualitative data about implementation challenges, especially capacity, professional development, effective teaching strategies, state and local conditions, and local fidelity to state policies
     ➢ Qualitative and quantitative measures that help quantify the impact of classroom instruction, curriculum materials, technology, and support services for teachers and students on achievement
     ➢ Measures of student behaviors and mindsets that are associated with college and career readiness (i.e., deeper learning skills and abilities)
     ➢ Qualitative data and lessons learned from state and district leaders about past standards implementation
2. **Improve coordination and information sharing among important stakeholders.**

- Create a mechanism (such as a yearly meeting or forum) to ensure ongoing coordination and information sharing on the Common Core research agenda among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. This would enable researchers to keep current on the data and information needs of policymakers and practitioners and enable policymakers and practitioners to learn about relevant research findings and ongoing or planned studies.

  This could be done through multiple avenues such as:

  - Regular meetings of key research and policy and practitioner groups along the lines of the two meetings convened by CEP
  - Special sessions or forums at existing national and state meetings of research and practitioner groups and foundations, such as AERA, NGA, NASSP, AFT, NEA, and major foundations
  - A voluntary partnership, consortium or “steering group” of representatives from major research, policy, and practitioner groups
  - A web “inventory” of Common Core research showing the groups conducting studies, the main issues being studied, and the status of the research

- Researchers and research organizations should be incentivized to seek opportunities to collaborate on Common Core research with local practitioners to ensure that at least some research studies are developed in direct response to classroom, school, and district-based needs.

  Examples might include:

  - Collaborative research projects between multiple research organizations in which different groups do a “piece” of a larger project that plays to their strengths (for example, DC EdCORE)
  - Collaborative research in which a research organization or university partners with a state or school district; this would allow researchers to study implementation on the ground and give practitioners input on how the study can meet their needs (for example, the Chicago Research Consortium)

- The research community should be considered and involved in policy decisions at all levels so they are—from the start—invested in the needs of policymakers and practitioners. This could allow limited research dollars to be used more efficiently, address gaps in the research agenda, and avoid duplication.
3. **Ensure that research studies are developed to provide a range of results that are timely and actionable.**

- Researchers should take steps to ensure that their studies are conducted in a timely fashion and have a mechanism to connect findings to policy and practice. This will entail presenting data and information in a manner that is easily accessible, both in form and content, to practitioners and policymakers.

Examples could include—

- Identifying early indicators of change that will allow a subset of results and information to be shared in enough time to inform the implementation process at different stages (short, medium and long-term)
- Explaining how data can support specific needs and concerns of policymakers and practitioners
- Reviewing university policies to incentivize and not discourage faculty from conducting timely, actionable research on Common Core
- Bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners to develop a framework of voluntary and flexible criteria to guide research on the Common Core that also addresses such goals as timeliness, rigor, consideration of purpose and target audience, sensitivity to policymaker and practitioner needs, and possible impact of research
- Key indicators should not only be developed to answer questions about setting, classroom practice and student learning, but also about the policy and political implications of implementation

4. **Improve communication and outreach to maximize the impact of research.**

- Policymakers and local education leaders should partner with researchers to define a reasonable “timeline of change” to ensure that the public and key stakeholders have realistic expectations about the pace, process, and results of education reforms such as the CCSS.

- Research organizations should make sure the findings of Common Core studies are communicated clearly to policymakers, practitioners, and the public.

Steps for accomplishing this might include—

- Discussions and focus groups among researchers and the media, practitioners, and policymakers about the best ways to communicate and disseminate findings from research to the people who will use them and the public (with an emphasis on social media and community networking strategies)
- Better utilization of short, action-oriented web-based publications and social media resources to convey key messages from research studies in plain language for policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and the public.
Efforts to showcase best practices and shine a light on places where there is vertical integration among researchers, policymakers and educators, all in support of the CCSS, that results in ongoing, steady improvement within schools and/or districts

5. **Ensure there is adequate funding for a range of research that supports all aspects of CCSS implementation**

- Foundations and other organizations should make a broad research agenda for the Common Core a priority, since the federal government is unlikely to provide much funding or leadership in this area.

- Federally-funded centers should focus not only on tools and resources to support implementation, but should also conduct research on the implementation process itself.

- A resource should be developed to share possible funding sources for Common Core research, including funding from programs that are not explicitly tied to the Common Core but are related, such as the Race to the Top and Title I programs, or from organizations that support work on college and career readiness.

**Conclusion**

The CCSS represents a rare opportunity to research and refine the progress of a major education reform. Because a majority of states adopted the standards and are currently engaged in implementation, the scope of knowledge and learning that can come from the CCSS is enormous. CEP’s aim in bringing together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to talk about mutual goals and challenges was to ensure that there is a broad recognition in the field about the opportunity at hand. We have learned important lessons from past reforms, including the need for a broad coalition of support and involvement. Now is the time to make sure all stakeholders understand the needs and concerns of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners and consider opportunities for partnership and collaboration in support of the CCSS.
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