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Teachers in Focus Groups Like Consistency and Rigor of Common Core Standards, Suggest New Ways To Make Assessments More Useful

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Public elementary school teachers participating in five focus groups on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and aligned assessments expressed generally positive views about the standards but said more work is needed to make student data from the new assessments more helpful to teachers.

“The implementation stage of the standards is over, and now teachers are focused on improving the ways they teach to the new standards and use data from the new assessments,” said Maria Ferguson, CEP’s Executive Director. “The good news is there are some very clear steps policymakers and local leaders can take to support teachers in their efforts.”

The focus groups were conducted in the spring and summer of 2016 by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University, and included K-5 teachers from five school districts in Illinois, Delaware, Wisconsin and Utah—four states that adopted the Common Core but are using different approaches to assess students’ learning of the standards. The focus group discussions echoed and added depth to findings from a nationally representative survey of K-12 teachers administered by CEP in 2015. The information gathered from the focus groups is described in a new CEP report, [*Listening to and Learning from Teachers: A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments*](#).

The focus group teachers saw value in having a “thread of consistency” in the standards throughout the country and said the Common Core has increased academic rigor and helped them focus on the most important things students should learn. Still, some teachers in grades K-2 expressed concern that by ratcheting up expectations, the new standards may be pushing younger students too hard without recognizing differences in maturity and school readiness and leaving less time for younger children to develop important social and emotional skills.

Consistent with CEP’s 2015 teacher survey findings, focus group teachers said they were a primary source of curricula to teach the standards and often collaborated with their colleagues to analyze the standards and develop or adapt curricula. While

some teachers reported receiving professional development and coaching on the standards from their district or state, several teachers said that they still had to spend considerable time finding curricula and figuring out how best to teach the standards. However, many focus group teachers noted that curricular resources have improved and become more readily available in recent years.

And although in many states the standards have been in place for several years, focus group teachers indicated that state assessments aligned to the CCSS are still a work in progress. Focus group teachers found the results of the 2015 tests only somewhat helpful in informing instruction, which is similar to what teachers said in CEP's teacher survey. The reasons for this were varied. Some teachers said they only received a single score for each student, others reported receiving test data too late in the year, and some said the test data that states did make available to teachers was difficult to understand or navigate online.

In general, focus group teachers said they did use test data to determine how well their students are learning, but that they found data from other assessments given throughout the school year more useful than annual state test results for guiding their instruction. Many focus group teachers suggested that changes in the timing and overall length of the state tests and in the format and type of data reported to teachers could make these tests more useful to teachers.

"The new state CCSS-aligned assessments have the potential to provide teachers with a wealth of information on student performance, but state leaders need to take steps to make the data more timely and easily accessible," said Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's Deputy Director. "With the hard work of administering the new assessments behind them, states can now focus on giving teachers the tools they need to make the test data useful and relevant."

Listening to and Learning from Teachers also contains a set of policy recommendations based on teacher feedback from both the 2015 survey and the more recent focus groups. The report, an executive summary, and a technical appendix can be accessed free of charge from the CEP web site at www.cep-dc.org.

CEP will host a follow-up webinar on October 18, at 1 p.m. EDT, to discuss the focus group results as well as recommendations for supporting educators in their work with the Common Core and assessments. Registration and additional information will be provided soon.

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