

# Listening to and Learning from Teachers: A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments

## Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

### *The Focus Group Study*

Over the last six years, teachers nationwide have been on the front lines of a significant and challenging shift in education policy and practice. Implementing new, more rigorous education standards, along with assessments that measure students' progress in learning the standards, is a major undertaking. Teachers are one of the best sources of information about how new standards and assessments are being implemented.

To hear directly from teachers about their experiences in teaching the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and using state assessments aligned to the standards, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) conducted five focus groups in the spring and summer of 2016. The focus groups were held in five districts in four states that are implementing the CCSS—Delaware, Illinois, Utah, and Wisconsin—but are using different assessments to measure students' progress in learning the standards.

The focus groups targeted public school teachers in grades K-5 because elementary teachers generally teach both mathematics and English language arts (ELA), the subjects addressed by the CCSS. Altogether, 26 teachers from different elementary grades and with varying years of experience participated in the five sites. It is important to remember that focus groups, by their nature, capture the views of a very limited number of teachers and that the comments of focus group participants are not representative of their school, district, state, or the nation.

The focus group study was designed as a follow-up to CEP's nationally representative survey of public school K-12 teachers, conducted in November-December of 2015. That survey explored a broad range of issues facing teachers and their profession, and the results were reported in *Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices*, also available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

*So when the Common Core standards came out, I think that that really helped uphold, "Here's what we expect and whether you like it or not, if you want your kid to be successful in life as an adult, this is [what]...they should be able to do, because other people who are successful throughout the world can do that."*

This synopsis highlights the key findings across the focus groups, with a sample of supporting quotations from focus group participants. It also includes policy recommendations developed by CEP based on the focus group discussions and the 2015 survey. The full focus group report and an appendix explaining the methodology are available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

### *Key Findings from Elementary School Focus Groups*

#### The Standards

**Across the five focus groups, most elementary school teachers expressed positive views of the Common Core State Standards.**

Focus group participants cited several particular benefits of the standards, including greater uniformity across states in what students are learning, a greater focus on the most important knowledge and skills, increased rigor, a strong emphasis on higher-order thinking and reasoning skills, and a progression across grade levels of the content students should learn.

**However, several kindergarten and early elementary teachers felt that some of the standards were not developmentally appropriate for younger children.**

*We have to start at ground zero [for some kindergartners]. We have to spend the first quarter front loading letters and sounds, and how to hold a pencil, and how to sit in a chair, and none of that is accounted for in Common Core.*

Several teachers of grades K-2 said that by ratcheting up learning expectations, the Common Core may be “pushing children too quickly” and failing to recognize that not all young children are ready to learn all of the content in the standards.

**To ease concerns about the standards from some parents and community members, some teachers reported making efforts to counteract misinformation and misunderstandings about the CCSS.**

Focus group participants in some states said that misunderstandings or misinformation about the Common Core from parents and others has complicated their job. To address misunderstandings, some teachers and schools are providing parents with information about why the CCSS are important, how they are helping children to learn, and how parents can help their children with homework.

## Curriculum and Instruction

**Teachers reported doing much of the initial work on their own to develop and revise curriculum aligned to the Common Core, in large part because few CCSS-aligned materials were available in the early years of implementation.**

As a starting point for implementing the Common Core, many focus group participants collaborated with other teachers in their school or district to closely analyze the standards and begin aligning curricula. In addition, some teachers received district- or state-provided professional development or coaching to help them implement the CCSS. This spirit of collaboration forged while reviewing the standards carried over to instruction, as several focus group participants reported sharing methods and materials for teaching the CCSS.

*Prior to the Common Core State Standards, I don't think many of us were involved in writing our own curriculum. But then when the Common Core came out...we didn't really have a curriculum.... We hunted, begged, searched, and tried to piece together things that matched that standard.*

In all of the focus groups, teachers reported developing or revising curricula to align it with the standards or finding CCSS-aligned materials on their own. Several teachers said they did this out of necessity because in the early years of standards implementation, districts did not have standards-aligned curricula, and few materials for teaching the Common Core were available from other sources. Developing or revising curricula was challenging and time-consuming, according to some participants.

The availability of CCSS-aligned curricular resources has improved in recent years, several teachers noted. At the time of our study, however, some teachers said they were still using textbooks that were not aligned with the standards.

**Teachers said the Common Core has changed instruction in positive ways, such as teaching for conceptual understanding and developing students’ thinking and problem-solving skills.**

*I like the way [teaching the math standards] makes kids stretch, it makes kids think, it makes them have to justify why that makes sense. It makes them look at thinking about their math instead of just moving numbers around.*

In one focus group, for example, teachers said that under the CCSS, they are teaching to improve students’ thinking skills and their ability to explain or justify why they did something.

**Pressure to prepare students for the academic demands of the CCSS has reduced time for learning through activities that help students build social-emotional skills, according to some teachers.**

Several teachers made the point that the emphasis on rigorous academic standards has reduced opportunities for students to exercise creative talents and to learn important social, emotional, and life skills, especially in the early grades.

**Assessments**

**Focus group teachers said the information they received from the state about their students’ performance on state summative assessments was not very helpful.**

Some teachers said they only received a single score for each student, which was not enough to help them understand the specific areas where students were struggling or how to adjust future instruction. According to some focus group participants, the state assessment reports sent to parents were more detailed and informative than the data teachers received.

Although more detailed information about student performance on state tests was available to teachers through secure online portals, most focus group teachers found these difficult to navigate, and were left to analyze the testing reports on their own. However, two teachers in the same focus group reported receiving state training on how to use the state assessment data portal, and these teachers found the data more helpful than did their peers.

**Teachers do use assessment data to guide their instruction, but they find tests other than the state math and ELA summative exams more informative for this purpose.**

Many teachers said they received results from state summative exams too late in the school year to inform instruction for their current class. Instead, some focus group teachers have developed CCSS-aligned assessments that they and their colleagues can use throughout the school year. Other teachers said they rely on state- or district-provided interim exams to help guide their instruction.

*So we take the test in spring time.... We get the scores back with two weeks to go in the school year. And then next year, we’re supposed to adapt our teaching to a completely different group of students.*

**Focus group teachers expressed other concerns about the impact of state summative assessments on students.**

Some teachers said that testing takes too long and puts children under too much stress. Others worried about how some students' weak keyboarding skills could affect their test scores, especially for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. And teachers in one focus group wondered about the validity of test results when some students take paper-and-pencil tests while others take tests on computers, which students may find more engaging.

## *Policy Recommendations*

Based on what we heard in the focus groups and learned from our 2015 teacher survey, CEP has developed several policy recommendations.

### **1) Connect teacher voices to policymaking, especially at the local level.**

- School and district leaders and policymakers at the state and national levels need to develop a formal process for involving teachers in policy decisions.
- District or school-based research partnerships are an excellent way to meaningfully involve teachers in efforts to improve classroom teaching and learning.

### **2) Engage in outreach around the standards.**

- State and local leaders should engage with stakeholders around the standards.
- State and local leaders should pay attention to teachers' views about the standards since teachers are the frontline implementers.

### **3) Provide teachers with high-quality CCSS-aligned curricular materials.**

- States and districts should purchase CCSS-aligned textbooks that have been properly vetted to ensure quality and alignment.
- States, education researchers, national organizations, and other groups with expertise need to identify and disseminate well-aligned curricular resources.

### **4) Provide teachers with examples of teachers teaching CCSS content.**

- State and district leaders and national organizations could help teachers by identifying and disseminating online videos of teachers implementing Common Core-aligned instruction.
- District and school leaders need to provide in-district examples of teachers implementing Common Core-aligned instruction and opportunities to share instructional techniques.

### **5) Recognize that new assessments are still a work in progress.**

- States and testing consortia could consider shortening the length of the assessments
- State and district leaders should plan for students that have weaker computer and keyboarding skills.
- States could take advantage of the opportunity under ESSA to administer interim assessments that result in a single summative score.

**6) Provide teachers with timely state assessment in a useful format and with professional development on how to access and use test information.**

- States should consider sharing with teachers the state math and ELA test data they already give to parents.
- States and districts should provide teachers with relevant professional development opportunities so they can better use assessment results to improve their instruction.

CEP's focus groups show that while teachers generally feel good about the standards and the level of rigor they demand of students, there are still operational aspects of implementation that make their work challenging. The CCSS-aligned are just beginning to be used, and a process of evaluation and improvement is important to making the assessments more useful for teachers.

In the end, schools and districts will need time, reflection, and dedicated resources to make a real go of the standards and assessments. The experiences and insights of teachers can be a valuable source of information to ensure the standards and assessments improve teaching and learning.

The full report and a technical appendix can be accessed free of charge from the CEP web site at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

*Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.*



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