

# INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS

## The Missing Piece in State Education Standards



The Education Trust

### TO THE POINT

- ▶ Instructional supports guide how academic standards are taught and translated into student learning.
- ▶ Teachers want a clear curricular framework, a rich array of teaching resources, and ideas for assignments that tap higher order thinking.
- ▶ As states implement new standards, they must simultaneously provide teachers with the tools to teach them effectively.

“Teaching can be isolating.  
We do not have [any sort of method  
for sharing curricular resources] in  
my district.”

— *A sixth-grade special education teacher from Massachusetts.*

# INTRODUCTION

As we look ahead to the arrival and implementation of college- and career-ready standards, we must remember that we have been down a similar road before. Twice in the recent past — under No Child Left Behind and its predecessor, the Improving America’s Schools Act — states were asked to center instruction on a set of learning standards. While states created the standards, they left the hard work of determining exactly how to meet those standards up to individual school districts and schools. These efforts yielded uneven results that generally fell short of the need.

Some districts have taken responsibility for providing teachers clear, coherent resources that give them all the guidance they need to implement high-quality, sequential, and consistent lessons. Others have furnished little more than vague pacing guides that tell teachers which standards to cover and when. Still others have done nothing at all, passing the responsibility down to individual teachers. For teachers, the results of these varied approaches means that a fortunate few land in districts that provide significant, well-organized curricular resources and supports, but most end up in districts that offer nothing.

Not only does this mixed approach to standards produce disparate experiences for teachers, it also creates incredible inefficiency. Teachers who work right next door to one another end up in isolation, inventing their lessons from scratch every evening. Even when based on the same standards, lessons crafted in this manner can vary dramatically in how well they impart the intended information to students. And this wild variation in the quality of instruction has a direct impact on how well schools prepare students for college and career.

Indeed, merely possessing clarity about educational outcomes does not equip teachers to help their students learn at high levels. We need to learn from past mistakes and not

squander new efforts by failing to address the key element that lifts standards off the paper, brings them to life in our classrooms, and translates them into student learning: rich curricular supports.

Advocates for stronger schools recognize that, if we want our students to do better, we must raise the expectations to which they are held. To this end, states are getting serious about holding their students to new and better academic standards. Already, 45 states have adopted Common Core standards that establish expectations for mathematics and language arts in each grade level that are calibrated to college and career readiness by the end of high school. In most of these states, the new standards are significantly more rigorous than those previously in use; they raise the expectations of what students should know and be able to do at every level.

For this reason, the transition from current state standards to the new college- and career-ready standards is not a subtle shift. To make this transition as smooth as possible for teachers — who represent the front line in the rollout of new standards — they must have adequate tools to get the job done. States with more capacity to develop consistent high-quality materials have a responsibility to districts and teachers to provide not just new standards, but the necessary resources to teach them well.

In this paper, The Education Trust offers insights about the best ways states can support our nation’s educators in their efforts to help students meet high academic standards. We hope this report will inform the decisions of education policymakers as they aim to use the new standards to lift achievement and prepare all students for college and careers.

# Instructional Supports

## The Missing Piece in State Education Standards

BY SARAH ALMY

Each night, millions of teachers arrive home exhausted after a long day of teaching and, after a few hours grading homework, dive straight into planning the next day's lessons. The task is the same for all teachers: Determine the best way to help students master course material. Although many are planning for the same course, all are expected to come up with their own solutions, cobble together their own materials, and work alone to translate pages of state content standards into meaningful, engaging lessons.

The resources these teachers have to work with vary. Some may start with outdated textbooks or a few Web links provided by their district, others begin with nothing but a blank lesson plan. Some are able to brainstorm ideas with a teacher down the hall, but for those who are the only teacher in their subject for miles around, bouncing ideas off a colleague is not an option. Some may have inherited lesson plans from their predecessors, but they may have no way of assessing whether the lessons are of good quality. The few who teach in districts with a central bank of vetted lesson resources may not even know those resources are available.

All these teachers are working from state content standards. And yet, their experiences and, most importantly, those of their students, vary greatly.

Imagine the different ways the following fifth-grade reading standard from the Common Core could be interpreted:

*Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.*

In response to this prompt, one teacher engages her students with a high-level informational text and challenges them to translate it into a summary for a later report. Another tells her students to draw a picture and complete a one-sentence summary. Both of these teachers adamantly believe — and rightfully argue — that they are teaching the intended standard. But the quality of instruction experienced by their students and

the ways these educators have prepared students to build upon their knowledge differs dramatically.

Absent clear information, not just about what standards to teach, but about what excellence looks like for each of those standards, teachers are forced to create their own interpretation. And students pay the price. That price is especially high for poor students and students of color. Research and experience demonstrate that these children are the most likely to receive low-level assignments.

“Because state standards are so vague, and you can go in so many different directions, it’s hard for teachers to figure out what to do”<sup>1</sup>

Common Core offers the promise of higher standards for classrooms nationwide. Yet alone, the new standards will not bring us closer to becoming a nation of college- and career-ready students. The new standards lay out a rigorous framework describing the learning outcomes students should reach, but they do not provide any guidance on the content that should be used. The hard work of translating individual standards into a sequence of lessons that are actually meaningful and instructive to students is still to come. This work is more than most districts — and certainly most teachers — have the capacity to undertake individually. States must step up and ensure that teachers have access to adequate tools for strong lesson planning and delivery.

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## WHAT TEACHERS DO AND DON'T WANT

Teachers are by far the most important in-school factor in determining whether our students succeed and our nation's schools improve. It is precisely because teachers matter so much to student learning that we can't just wish them luck with the new standards and then abandon them. With the rollout of college- and career-ready standards, states have an opportunity to influence the success of implementation and support teachers at the classroom level.


To ensure that the standards actually translate into good classroom teaching, states, or even groups of states, should provide teachers with a bank of high-quality instructional resources. This resource bank must be aligned with the learning progressions outlined in the new standards, and must set the same rigorous expectations for students as do the standards. These resources can't just be short pacing guides that plopping the standards onto a calendar and pretend this is all teachers need. They must be comprehensive — materials that teachers can trust to be of good quality and that they can review, download, customize, and use in their classrooms without having to create lots of other complementary materials.

At The Education Trust, we have the opportunity to talk with and hear from teachers in both formal and informal settings. During these conversations, teachers express a need for better curricular supports than those that are currently available in their districts and states.

To start, they say they need a clear curricular framework that maps out, in a coherent and connected way, which standards they should cover and when. Building on this framework, they want high-quality instructional units that provide the content through which to deliver the standards. The instructional units should include full lesson plans that sequentially link content, and build on acquired knowledge. And within these materials, they want the detailed resources — graphic organizers, primary source readings, activity instructions, worksheets, and assessments — that enable them to execute the lesson plans. Finally, teachers say they want high-level assignments that will push students to use higher order thinking, and samples of actual student work on these assignments evaluated against a rubric so they can norm their own standards.

Teachers are also very clear about what they do not want.

They do not want a teacher-proof curriculum that prevents them from customizing lessons to best meet the needs of their students. They do not want a hodgepodge



## MAKING CURRICULA HELPFUL, NOT TEACHER-PROOF

What's the difference between a teacher-proof curriculum and the resources that we are proposing? One good example is the Core Knowledge program, which provides K-8 teachers in all subject areas with rich resources to guide their planning and instruction. Core Knowledge users receive a logical sequence of content that incrementally builds upon the skills and knowledge introduced to students in each stage of the program. The content sequence is complemented by a teacher handbook, which guides lesson planning by providing specific topics and subject matter to be taught. The handbook also draws attention to children's developmental readiness for different tasks and topics, based on what has been covered previously in the content sequence.

For example, rather than simply listing a standard such as "The student will read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of nonfiction texts," the handbook provides recommended texts for teachers to use, lesson suggestions, and an overview of the skills students should already have mastered as they approach this standard. The handbooks do not mandate a particular way of teaching and don't require teachers to follow a script. So the program provides teachers with much more guidance than standards alone, while also giving them flexibility and creativity in implementing the lessons.

of materials of varying quality that they must then spend hours digging through to determine which are best. And they do not want stand-alone lesson plans without a larger instructional unit, or arbitrary content suggestions without a logical progression of learning. Teachers want to work smarter, not just harder, and they need structures and systems that help them do so.

We don't expect every doctor to discover on her own what a healthy heart looks like and then completely make up a set of diagnostic and treatment procedures. Rather, we expect all doctors to learn and adopt a set of standards and practices that they can then apply in unique, personalized ways. Similarly, teachers benefit from the establishment of standards and accompanying instructional supports. These tools do not reduce them to automatons reading scripts. Rather, they arm them with clear expectations and high-quality materials that they can then use to understand exactly where their students are, and how to move them forward.

### WHAT TEACHERS NEED, WHAT STATES CAN DO

As states prepare for the rollout of college- and career-ready standards, there are things teachers need and deserve so that these standards have a significant impact on classrooms and students. Most important, teachers need to know that, regardless of where they choose to teach, they will have access to high-quality resources and tools they can use in their daily instruction. To make this possible, states must:

- **Create curricular maps that outline the knowledge and skills required by the new standards.** Teachers need to understand what skills and content the new standards require students to know. To facilitate this, states should build curricular maps that incorporate faithfully the demands and qualities embedded in the standards, and that provide teachers with a clear guide of what to teach. These frameworks must be a coordinated, logical progression of skills and knowledge aligned with how students learn at particular ages and in specific content areas. For example, as part of its move to the Common Core standards, Maryland designed a Common State Framework that articulates the skills and content that students must know in order to meet the standards. The framework will form the basis for a full state curriculum.
- **Develop comprehensive banks of detailed curricular resources.** A framework alone isn't enough. Teachers also deserve highly organized, logically sequenced

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resource banks that build on the curricular maps. These banks should include model units, lesson plans, strategies for intervention and differentiation, multimedia resources, and exemplars of student work, scored to clarify the meaning of "meets expectations."

These state-level resource banks can enable districts to monitor the consistency and quality of instruction across schools. They can also allow teachers to focus on customizing resources to meet the specific needs of their students. Districts and individual teachers don't possess the capacity to develop full sets of high-quality resources that link together coherently and are practice-tested through use in the classroom. But states can create this capacity.

To make the most of capacity, conserve resources, and promote quality, states can collaborate on assembling these resource banks. Some states are already starting to work together: Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, and North Carolina are partnering on an open-source platform slated for rollout in 2013. This new resource will contain lesson plans, diagnostic tools, and curricular units all aimed at preparing students for college and career. The Literacy Design Collaborative and the Math Design Collaborative also offer resources designed to help teachers align their

assignments to the Common Core standards. For more information, visit <https://knowledgebase.newvisions.org/CustomTeamsIndividual.aspx?id=409>

- **Learn and borrow from what works.** Just as teachers shouldn't have to reinvent countless wheels in their lesson planning, states can learn from the work of other districts. States can start by identifying the leading districts and schools in their midst, encouraging others in the state to learn and borrow from any high-quality materials that have already been created. States should also look beyond their own borders and consider the work of districts in other states. For example, New York City plans an extensive rollout of the Common Core standards and supporting materials for all its teachers, and could be a useful resource to other districts in New York and other states.
- **Set a clear picture of what excellence looks like.** To practice teaching excellence under the new standards, teachers need to know what it looks like. As part of the curricular resource bank, states should include videos of exemplary teaching on some of the more challenging standards. The resource bank should also include a wealth of exemplars of student work. Georgia has taken this approach with instructional supports designed to complement current state writing standards. In addition to lesson plans and other instructional tools, Georgia includes samples of student work so teachers have clear, appropriate, and aligned expectations for their students.
- **Establish communications and professional development on available resources.** Building an excellent resource bank is an important step, but it is virtually useless unless teachers know how to find it. States should take care to invest in communications and high-quality professional development to inform teachers and school leaders about the available resources, and provide them with opportunities to explore the materials in collaboration with their colleagues. For instance, Maryland is convening teams from every school in the state to familiarize them first with the new standards and curricular frameworks, and then with the state curriculum. In addition, states should work with institutions of higher education to ensure that they update instruction to effectively prepare prospective teachers to teach new standards.

- **Maintain quality control.** Teachers will only draw on the curricular resource bank if it is well-maintained and useful. States must commit to keeping the resource bank updated with the best available lesson resources and student exemplars. Once all districts and schools are fully implementing the new standards, a wealth of real student work and lessons customized for different groups of students will emerge. States should assume ongoing responsibility for identifying top materials that can enhance the resource bank as a useful source of planning for teachers, while maintaining its quality.

## START TODAY!



States should begin to take these steps now so instructional tools are available to complement new college- and career-ready standards as soon as they are implemented.

Keep in mind, however, that just providing teachers with better standards and instructional materials is not enough. To truly give every student the opportunity for a college- and career-ready education, we must also do a better job of supporting our teachers through robust performance evaluation and relevant professional development. Together with strong curricular materials, these measures will make a vital contribution to creating the high-quality system of education that all our students need and deserve.

## NOTES

- 1 "Informative, Not Scripted: Core Knowledge Shows How Clear, Specific Content Supports Good Instruction," *American Educator*, Spring, 2008.

## ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

## TheJoyceFoundation

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