CENTER ON
EDUCATION
POLICY **CEP**

A Research Agenda for the Common Core State Standards:

What Information Do Policymakers Need?

As 2014 unfolds, much work remains to be done to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS-aligned assessments developed by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced state consortia are ready to be piloted this spring and will begin to be fully administered in school year 2014-15. As the assessments become a reality in states and districts, education leaders from the statehouse to the schoolhouse will need an array of resources to help them get up to speed on the Common Core.

This report looks specifically at the most immediate information and data needs of policymakers related to the Common Core and the types of research that could provide this information. The ideas in this report were informed by a series of meetings and discussions about a possible research agenda for the Common Core, sponsored by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at The George Washington University and attended by representatives of education policy organizations, researchers, and other key stakeholder groups.

Participants in these discussions identified four areas of policy-related research that will be needed in the coming year:

- Case studies of states and districts that are successfully implementing the CCSS

- Case studies of outreach strategies being used by states and districts to inform stakeholders about the CCSS and the consortia-developed assessments

- Studies of the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to lead CCSS implementation

- Analyses of the impact of federal ESEA requirements on CCSS implementation

Each of these four areas is examined in more detail in later sections of this paper.

educator evaluation

curricula

professional development

assessment

standards

instruction

teacher certification

Reasons Why Policymakers Need Research-Based Information on the CCSS

State and local policymakers have played and will continue to play a critical role in implementing and establishing policies for the CCSS. At the state level, key policymakers include governors, state legislatures, state boards of education, state superintendents and state higher education officials; at the district level, they include school superintendents and school boards. Although the CCSS have been developed and adopted by states, federal policymakers also make decisions relevant to the Common Core, such as determining how the federal education programs will affect, and be affected by, implementation of these standards.

There are several reasons why policymakers will need timely, actionable information from objective research on the Common Core. First, state and local policymakers want to assist schools with CCSS implementation but often don't know where to start. In addition, classroom teachers are looking to their districts and states for curricula and other CCSS-aligned materials and strategies to help them prepare students to master the knowledge and skills in the Common Core. Research on effective approaches to implementing the CCSS can help with these tasks.

Second, some state and local policymakers have a limited understanding of the CCSS and accompanying assessments. Yet, these policymakers must reach decisions about the Common Core in an environment rampant with misinformation about what the standards represent, how they came into being, and how they will shape education. Independent research-based information can help policymakers arrive at better decisions.

Third, the Common Core is the focus of a great deal of legislative action and debate. In 2013 alone, nearly 300 bills related to the Common Core were introduced in state legislatures, and state legislators appear to be on track to introduce a similar number of bills this year (http://www.ccrslegislation.info/). Consideration of these measures would be enhanced if state policymakers had access to CCSS research that explores areas of concern, provides information on promising practices, and measures the impact of the standards on student learning.

Fourth, decisions about the CCSS have implications for numerous other programs and policies. For example, state standards for the content students should learn and state assessments for measuring that learning have a bearing on accountability requirements and efforts to turn around low-performing schools. State decisions about technology upgrades may be influenced by the technology demands of administering consortia-developed assessments aligned to the CCSS. Policymakers could benefit from research about the current and likely impact of the CCSS on these and other areas.

Background on CEP Meetings

During 2013, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, CEP convened two meetings of leading researchers, practitioners, and policymakers aimed at strengthening the connections between CCSS-related research and the information needs of policymakers and practitioners and identifying specific areas where research would be helpful. In addition to hosting the two formal meetings, CEP held a series of discussions with individuals from national organizations representing key policymakers and K-12 education practitioners in order to better understand these stakeholders' specific needs for CCSS information. The discussion at the meetings and the recommendations that emerged from this process are summarized in *A Research Agenda for the Common Core State Standards*, available on the CEP web site (**www.cep-dc.org**).

Building on this work, CEP met again in the winter of 2013-14 with individuals from organizations and institutions representing education policymakers (see box). The purpose of these meetings was to identify the immediate data and information needs of policymakers related to the Common Core.

Organizations Representing Education Policymakers Involved in CEP Discussions

During 2013-14, CEP met with representatives from the following organizations to discuss their membership's research needs related to the Common Core State Standards:

➤ National Association of State Boards of Education

➤ National Governors Association

➤ National Conference of State Legislatures

➤ Council of Chief State School Officers

➤ American Association of School Administrators

➤ National School Boards Association

➤ State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

➤ Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education

➤ Congressional staff

State and District Case Studies of Successful CCSS Implementation

Many of the individuals we spoke with emphasized the need for examples of what is working. While practitioners are in the throes of CCSS implementation, policymakers are trying to support this process, and all are acting on very little information. Timely case studies or other modes of research could inform efforts to implement the standards. Some possible research focus areas include the following:

• Studies of states and districts where CCSS implementation is succeeding, or is farther along than usual, to learn which approaches are most effective. These case studies could explore the policy and political conditions that support implementation as well as identify barriers to implementation and how they are being overcome.

• An examination of the roles of state/business/higher education partnerships in CCSS implementation. Are these partnerships leading the implementation efforts or are they on the periphery? Where they are leading, what factors have supported or elevated the partnership?

- Studies highlighting successful collaborations between the K-12 and higher education communities around implementation of the CCSS and aligned assessments. The studies would emphasize the conditions that make these collaborations successful and would identify lessons learned in order to inform the efforts of nascent partnerships of this type.

- Identification of states and/or districts that have undertaken initiatives to help prepare low-achieving students for the increased rigor of the CCSS. How are they approaching this task?

- Reviews of states' efforts to prepare for the new assessments, including efforts to ensure that the technology requirements are in place and that student data privacy is being managed.

Case Studies of State and District Outreach Strategies Around the CCSS and the Consortia-Developed Assessments

State and local policymakers are grappling with strategies for conducting effective outreach to inform parents, teachers, community leaders, and other stakeholders about the CCSS and related assessments and explain why they are needed. Possible research areas to explore include these:

- Case studies, program evaluations or other research on SEAs and school districts that have led CCSS information campaigns, in order to learn how the campaigns are organized and funded, what role the SEA plays, and how closely the state is working with in-state partners and/or national organizations. Research could include interviews with or surveys of end-users of the information to learn the usefulness of the material provided.

- Surveys, interviews, or other research to determine the obstacles faced by states and districts in mounting outreach campaigns around the CCSS, especially in light of how politically charged the standards have become and the prominent supporters and detractors that the CCSS have attracted.

Studies of SEA Capacity to Lead CCSS Implementation

Organizations representing state policymakers are particularly concerned about the capacity of SEAs to lead the CCSS implementation efforts. They would like to see research in the following areas:

- Research on how SEAs can best be structured to lead and manage the CCSS implementation process, including ways to attract and pay for well-qualified staff with the necessary skills.

- Case studies of SEAs in states that are successfully implementing the standards to learn how the agencies are organized and the types of CCSS-related services/support they offer to districts and schools.

- Studies of how SEAs can be reorganized so they are less "siloed" and better able to provide consistent and cohesive assistance to school districts across program areas.

The Impact of Federal ESEA Requirements on CCSS Implementation

Many of the individuals we spoke with expressed apprehension about how the implementation of and support for the CCSS are being affected by the testing and accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA/NCLB) and by the U.S. Department of Education waivers of key ESEA requirements. There is an overriding concern that federal testing and accountability requirements will negatively impact the CCSS by pushing school systems to make high-stakes decisions before teachers have fully transitioned to teaching the CCSS and students have had sufficient time to learn them. Some suggested areas of research include these:

- A review of past research on standards to determine the appropriate length of time that standards should be implemented before consequences (most notably, school accountability decisions and teacher evaluations) are attached to student performance on tests.

- An examination of federal ESEA/NCLB statutory and waiver requirements to determine the pressures that could impact CCSS implementation.

- Development of research-based recommendations for revising federal accountability policies to give the CCSS the best chance for success.

Other Items on the CCSS Research Agenda

The individuals we spoke with also pointed to longer-term research needs related to the Common Core. Critical research areas include evaluations of CCSS implementation to learn over time which strategies worked and which did not; evaluations of whether or not the CCSS adequately prepared students for college and careers; and analyses of the CCSS-aligned assessments to determine if they accurately measure college and career readiness.

In addition, representatives of policy groups suggested that researchers could revisit past studies that might inform policymakers about some aspects of CCSS implementation. For example, a large body of research has examined SEA capacity. Perhaps highlighting findings from these studies could answer some questions about SEA capacity to lead Common Core implementation. Similarly, past research on standards-based education reform may help policymakers understand what sorts of supports are needed now to carry out the new standards effectively.

Finally, although not an area for research, the individuals we spoke with were nearly unanimous about the need for more information on what the CCSS and the consortia-developed assessments are and are not. Many of the organizations representing elected officials said that this type of information is greatly needed because some of their members are unsure what the "truth" is about the standards and assessments or because their members are hearing from constituents who may not always have accurate information about the CCSS and the aligned tests. The individuals CEP met with indicated that an extensive and coordinated communications campaign would help reduce the "noise level" surrounding the Common Core and enhance implementation efforts.

Communicating Findings

Our fall 2013 report, *A Research Agenda for the Common Core State Standards*, outlines steps that researchers can take to ensure that their findings reach policymakers. For example, research findings need to be written in a language and format that is easily accessible to non-researchers. To do this effectively, researchers may have to rewrite their studies for a policy audience, with key findings and recommendations up front, and charts and tables clearly labeled and explained. Researchers should also understand that policymakers often need *immediate* information that is timely and relevant to the debate at hand. As such, the gold-standard timeline for conventional research studies does not always work well for policy research. Therefore, alternative—yet valid—approaches to the research process and timelines should be considered. Finally, policymakers who participated in our 2013 meetings cited the need for the research findings to be widely disseminated and urged research groups to make an effort to get the information into the hands of policymakers at all levels of government. Some successful means of dissemination include aggressive news media outreach, and the use of social media, list serves and mailings to share the findings.

Conclusion

Education policymakers have a great need for timely information on the Common Core, which presents an opportunity for researchers to actively engage and influence the policies surrounding the implementation of these standards. To do this, however, researchers must undertake studies and revisit relevant past research that addresses the information needs of policymakers. They must also produce findings in a timely manner and communicate them clearly for a lay audience. CEP undertook this project to build on our work connecting researchers with policymakers and practitioners. Charitable foundations, education organizations, and researchers need to take the next steps to fund and carry out research projects on the topics outlined in this report.

CENTER ON
EDUCATION
POLICY **CEP**