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Listening to and Learning from Teachers:

A Summary of Focus Groups on the Common Core and Assessments

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Introduction

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 and more rigorous standards and new assessments is a major undertaking, and the learning curve is steep. As schools move forward, beyond the early years of implementation, teachers remain one of the best sources of information about the details of teaching the standards and using the assessments to measure student learning. Their insights and feedback can support a process of continuous improvement to inform teaching and learning.

In 2015, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) surveyed a nationally representative sample of public school teachers. The survey report, *Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices*, explored a wide range of issues facing teachers and the profession. The survey found that many secondary school teachers believe it is important for students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as emphasized in new state college- and career-ready standards. The survey also revealed teachers' sense of frustration about their "lack of voice" in decision-making at the local, state, and federal levels. The survey further showed that sizable majorities of mathematics and English language arts (ELA) teachers are relying on their colleagues, self-study, professional development, and other means to develop standards-aligned curricula and understand assessment data, and are using state assessment data to modify their teaching.

At the time of CEP's survey administration, 42 states and the District of Columbia had adopted and implemented the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in both math and ELA and were administering CCSS-aligned assessments. While *Listen to Us* provided some fascinating data points about teachers and their classroom experiences, CEP also wanted to dig deeper to capture first-hand the reflections of teachers implementing new standards and assessments. By talking directly to groups of teachers about their day-to-day experiences teaching to the standards and interpreting student test data from the new assessments, CEP hopes to contribute to an ongoing learning process that will improve instruction and student learning.

To do this, we conducted a series of focus groups with public elementary school teachers about their experiences in implementing the CCSS and aligned assessments. CEP staff held focus groups with teachers from five districts in four states — Delaware, Illinois, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Altogether, 26 teachers participated across the five sites. The teachers vary in the elementary grades taught and years of experience.

The focus groups gave participating teachers an opportunity to explain how the Common Core standards and aligned assessments have impacted their classroom teaching, their students, and the school community. In the focus groups, we asked teachers about many issues including curriculum, instruction, professional development, and testing. The discussions with teachers were semi-structured and participants did have the opportunity to speak about other relevant issues not specifically addressed by the focus group protocol. This report summarizes the rich discussions that took place across the focus groups.

It is important to remember that focus groups, by their very nature, capture the views of only a small number of teachers, and that the comments made by these teachers are not representative of their school, district, state, or the nation. In addition, not every teacher in a focus group remarked on every topic, so the comments in this report should not be taken as the consensus of any focus group.

Still, the time we spent talking with teachers was remarkably productive. Despite facing some challenges with teaching to the Common Core and using the new assessments, the focus group teachers talked mostly about what could be done to make things better for teachers and for students. Based on both teacher survey data and focus group feedback, CEP has developed a set of key policy recommendations for state and local leaders as they continue their efforts to raise the bar and improve teaching and learning for all students. Those recommendations can be found at the end of the report.

Summary of Findings across Elementary School Focus Groups

Standards

- Across the five focus groups, most teachers expressed positive views of the Common Core State Standards.
- However, several kindergarten and early elementary teachers felt that some of the standards were not developmentally appropriate for younger children.
- To ease concerns about the standards from some parents and community members, some teachers reported making efforts to counteract misinformation and misunderstandings about the Common Core.

Curriculum and Instruction

- 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 all focus group sites, teachers reported doing much of the initial work on their own to develop and revise curriculum to align it to the Common Core, in large part because few CCSS-aligned materials were available in the early years of implementation.
- The availability of CCSS-aligned curricular resources has improved in recent years, according to the focus group participants. At the time of our study, however, some teachers said they were still using textbooks that were not aligned with the standards.
- Teachers said that the Common Core has changed instruction in positive ways, such as teaching for conceptual understanding and developing students' thinking and problem-solving skills.
- 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.

Assessments

- Teachers in the focus groups said the information they received from the state about their students' performance on state summative assessments was not very helpful, with some teachers only receiving a single score for their students. Although more detailed information on student performance was available to teachers on secure online portals, most focus group teachers found these difficult to navigate.
- 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 of the teachers in the focus groups have concerns about the state summative math and ELA assessments, including the length of time that students have to sit for the exams and the impact that non-cognitive abilities, such as keyboarding skills, may have on scores.

Background on the Focus Groups and Methods

The focus groups explored a range of issues:

- Teachers' views of the CCSS
- Teachers' preparation to implement the CCSS
- Teachers' experiences with developing, revising, and obtaining curricula aligned to the CCSS
- The impact of CCSS implementation on instruction and professional autonomy
- Teachers' experiences in administering assessments aligned to the CCSS
- Teachers' use of data from the CCSS-aligned assessments and their opinions about the helpfulness of that data

Several characteristics of the focus group design are noteworthy:

- **Teacher anonymity.** To encourage focus group participants to speak frankly, teachers were assured that neither their names nor the names of their schools and districts would be identified in reporting the focus group results. Even with the promise of individual anonymity, however, it is possible that views articulated in focus groups may be affected by group dynamics and teachers' relationships with their colleagues in the group.
- **Focus on elementary teachers.** We drew participants from the elementary grades (K-5) in order to hear the views of teachers who in most cases taught both math and ELA. Originally, we sought teachers who taught grades 3 and above because their students would be taking the CCSS-aligned state assessment. However, teachers in younger grades also volunteered to participate, and their insights proved valuable.
- **States and districts chosen to be "typical," not outliers.** CEP researchers used a set of specific educational metrics, based on enrollment, demographics, expenditures, and achievement, to develop a pool of states and districts that were closest to "typical." Within these guidelines, the final choice of districts still depended in part on which districts would agree to participate. (See the Appendix to this report at www.cep-dc.org for a more detailed list of metrics and description of the selection process.)
- **Different assessments in four states.** While all four states have adopted the CCSS, they are using different assessments to measure student mastery of the standards. Delaware is using assessments developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Illinois is administering the PARCC (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) consortium assessments. Utah is using its own state tests aligned to the Common Core standards. Wisconsin administered the Smarter Balanced assessments in 2015, but decided to use its own CCSS-aligned exam for future years.

To develop this report, CEP staff studied the transcripts from all of the focus groups. We used well-accepted coding and analysis procedures (see Appendix) to identify and extract themes and patterns, and exceptions thereto, from the transcripts and to compare the comments of different teachers within and between the five focus groups.

This focus group study was designed to be a companion piece to two other studies conducted by CEP. The first is the aforementioned nationally representative survey of public school K-12 teachers conducted between mid-November and mid-December of 2015 (*Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices*). The second is a CEP survey of school district leaders from a nationally representative sample of public school districts. The district survey was conducted from January to April of 2016, and 250 districts responded. The results will be released later in 2016.

Because the focus groups were limited to elementary school teachers, CEP did a special analysis of our national teacher survey data that examined the responses to questions about standards, curriculum, and assessment from the representative subset of respondents who were public elementary school teachers. The data in the tables and figures in this focus group report come from this special analysis of elementary teachers; therefore, the numbers may differ from those in CEP's previous teacher survey report, which included all grades. See the Appendix to this report at www.cep-dc.org for percentages, standard errors, and confidence intervals for all survey figures presented in this report.

This report is divided into three main sections: standards, curriculum and instruction, and assessments. Within each section, several topics are discussed. For the topics that were covered in the survey as well as the focus groups, we first present the pertinent survey data, and then summarize the focus group discussions. We believe this format will contextualize the focus group responses and provide insight into survey responses.

The Standards

Key Focus Group Findings

- **Across the five focus groups, most elementary school teachers expressed positive views of the Common Core State Standards.** Many teachers in different states liked the rigor, focus, and consistency of the CCSS. They saw value in having students learn and understand concepts instead of just memorizing answers, and they believed the standards could help to better prepare students for college and careers.
- **However, several kindergarten and early elementary teachers felt that some of the standards were not developmentally appropriate for younger children.** Teachers in more than one state noted that young children mature at different rates, and that not all children are developmentally ready to learn some of the academic content and skills in the standards for kindergarten or grades 1 and 2.
- **To ease concerns about the standards from some parents and other community members, some teachers reported making efforts to counteract misinformation and misunderstandings about the Common Core.** Some teachers said they faced opposition to the CCSS, particularly from parents who were frustrated by homework and teaching methods that differed from how they had been taught. To deal with this situation, some teachers said they explained to parents how the standards and the instructional methods they are using will help children learn better.

Generally Positive Views about the CCSS from Focus Groups

Across the focus groups, many teachers expressed positive views about the rigor, focus, and consistency of the Common Core State Standards and their potential to better prepare students for college and careers. The following comment from a Wisconsin teacher sums up views expressed by multiple teachers in different states:

> *The core standards have changed what we're doing … [Students are] learning a lot better … I know my students a lot better, and I can sit down with parents and say, "Okay, this is exactly where your child is having difficulty in reading" … But for me a lot of this was kind of helpful — the standards, and not the testing, [which] is way too much.*

Focus group participants cited several particular benefits of the Common Core standards.

- **Uniformity across states.** Some teachers saw value in having a "thread of consistency" in standards throughout the country and having everyone "going in the same direction." As a few teachers pointed out, however, this does not mean that every state or district will be teaching the same material at the same point in the school year.

- **Greater focus.** A few teachers noted that the standards have helped them focus on the most important things students should learn. As one Utah teacher explained, the content of the new standards "actually is less to teach and gives us more in-depth focus" on fewer topics than they previously covered.

- **Rigor for all students.** Several teachers from different states commended the standards for raising expectations for all students. When parents complain about the standards, a Utah teacher said she tells the parents that with the new math standards, "my high kids can still do math but my low kids can too." Some teachers said that the standards would better prepare students to do jobs of the future "that don't even exist right now" and to be "thinkers that can adapt to that kind of information." An Illinois teacher alluded to the need to increase academic rigor because of global competition:

  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."

- **Emphasis on higher-order skills.** Focus group teachers particularly liked how the Common Core standards call on students to think critically, engage in discussion, explain their reasoning, and back up their arguments with evidence. In ELA, for example, a Wisconsin teacher said her 3rd graders learned about persuasive, narrative, and informative writing and were "excited" when they could identify in detail how a paragraph was informative. Participants in other states made similar points:

  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.

  Everything is back to the text — what did they say in the text? Prove it by the text, give me your proof. And so that is a big improvement … not what you think and feel — we're getting away from that and getting back to the real meat and what's in the text.

- **Grade-to-grade progression.** Teachers in more than one focus group said they like how the standards are "tiered" so that the content builds on what was taught in earlier grades and increases in complexity as students progress through the grades.

Concerns about Appropriateness of the CCSS for Younger Children

In multiple focus groups, several teachers of grades K-2 said that by ratcheting up learning expectations, the Common Core may be "pushing children too quickly" and "not allowing for developmental appropriateness," as an Illinois kindergarten teacher observed.

These teachers emphasized that not all young children are developmentally ready to learn all of the content in the standards. In the early grades, an age difference of months can make a great difference in maturity and performance, a Wisconsin teacher pointed out. As a result, "we have a lot of kids absolutely convinced they're dumb," this teacher said, because they are struggling to master skills in the standards, and this affects their motivation in higher grades.

Kindergarten has become "supercharged," said a Wisconsin teacher, and is more like what 1st grade used to be in terms of expectations for reading. By the end of kindergarten, students are expected to be able to write three sentences and read at least 40 sight words, but this overlooks the reality that some kindergartners enter school not knowing how to hold a pencil or sit in a chair — and "none of that is accounted for" in the Common Core, a teacher explained.

Under previous state standards, the pressure to ensure children left kindergarten with all of the skills needed for 1st grade was less intense. An Illinois teacher said that under the CCSS, teachers feel pressure to get all students academically ready for the rigors of 1st grade. Moreover, as a result of the focus on early academics, "kids can't be kids" and "learn through play anymore," another Illinois teacher noted. This challenge is especially stressful in school districts that only offer half-day kindergarten.

A Delaware teacher agreed that Common Core expectations are high for kindergarteners — when they enter school at age 5, children may only be able to write their name but by the end of the year they are "supposed to be able to write 10 complete sentences that are connected."

The issue of rising expectations for young children is not limited to kindergarten. A Wisconsin teacher said the learning expectations for 2nd grade were higher by a half or a full guided reading level than under the state's previous standards, even though "the kids are still the same age." For example, the teacher explained, the Common Core standards for 2nd grade include more writing to prepare students to be able to write a five-paragraph essay when they enter 3rd grade, but it's hard for 2nd graders to write even one paragraph.

Concerns about How Standards Are Being Interpreted

Although views about the CCSS were generally positive, some focus group participants still expressed concerns about how these standards have been interpreted or implemented. One Illinois teacher said although the original idea of the Common Core "made so much sense" and was "fantastic" because it "got everybody on the same page," the involvement of state bureaucracies changed its nature. This teacher continued: "Everybody gets their little fingers in it and makes such a mess of it that everybody hates it now, and that's not what it was meant to be."

Administrators did not always agree with teachers about how to implement or interpret the CCSS, according to several Illinois teachers. For example, one teacher explained that while administrators were concerned about covering everything in the standards, teachers were "wondering how to make the standards work for themselves and their students." In addition, an administrator may interpret a standard very differently from how teachers interpret it. As an example, multiple teachers in this Illinois district described how administrators had misinterpreted language in the

standards calling on students to be able do a skill "with guidance and support." Administrators incorrectly equated this with student "mastery" of a skill, the teachers explained. As another teacher pointed out, however, the concept of "guidance and support" is itself "ambiguous," at least in ELA, because the level of support needed varies so much for different students.

Teachers in another Illinois district agreed that some of the standards were rather "fuzzy" and could be interpreted differently by different teachers. For example, said one teacher, several parts of the reading standards led her to wonder, "Well, what do they mean by that?" But this lack of clarity is not necessarily a bad thing in her view — it has led to productive conversations among teachers about what it would look like for a student to achieve a particular standard.

Teacher Reactions to Parent Opposition

Teachers in Utah, Illinois, and Delaware spoke about how opposition to the Common Core from some parents, political leaders, and others has complicated their job. Several teachers attributed this opposition to misunderstandings or misinformation and to parents' frustration with homework and teaching methods that differ from how they were taught. In addition, parents may confuse the methods used to teach to the standards — which may vary by classroom, school, or district — with the standards themselves.

Here are some illustrative comments:

> **An Illinois teacher:** *I think there's so much misinformation out there, it would be nice to just have a conversation of "What is it that you're against?" I think Common Core, essentially, is just increasing the standards for 21st century learners, so when people are like, "Eww," I don't know what's necessarily bad about having high expectations. And I don't think these … are ridiculous expectations …*

> **A Utah teacher:** *[Parents are] not understanding how we are instructing, because it's not the same as how they were instructed. And so when their child brings home this homework, they're saying, "No, no, you can't do it this way." [And the child says,] "This is the way my teachers teach me how to do it," and the parents aren't understanding our methods of instruction.*

> **A Delaware teacher:** *[Parents are] very misinformed, and Facebook is the perfect avenue to look at that. They believe that when their child comes home with a math strategy that is not what they were taught — and it might be a silly math strategy — they believe that that is Common Core. They do not understand that that teacher just used a resource or a strategy to teach that standard, but the parents think that strategy is Common Core.*

Teachers said they try to address these misunderstandings by providing parents with information about what the CCSS are, how they are helping children to learn, why particular assignments are important, and what parents need to understand to help their children with homework. A Delaware teacher said that when she was her school's Teacher of the Year, she made it part of her platform to help people understand the Common Core. A Utah teacher said that parents are more comfortable with the standards when they understand their purpose better. "Once [parents] understand we're teaching kids to understand and be able to explain rather than just 'regurgitate,' they are okay with it," said a Utah teacher. Participants in Delaware said their district sponsored information nights for parents but were unsure how well attended such events were.

Curriculum and Instruction

Key Focus Group Findings

- **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.** This early teacher teamwork on the standards helped to improve teacher collaboration, according to some Delaware and Illinois participants. In addition, some teachers said their district provided professional development or coaching on the standards.
- **In all focus group sites, teachers reported doing much of the initial work on their own to develop and revise curriculum to align it to the Common Core.** In the early years of standards implementation, fewer CCSS-aligned materials were available, and several teachers said their district had not provided them with standards-aligned curricula. Creating or adapting curricula to teach the standards was a challenge, according to these teachers.
- **The availability of CCSS-aligned curricular resources has improved in recent years, according to the focus groups.** At the time of the focus groups, however, some teachers said their districts were still using textbooks that were not aligned with the standards, often because the district had bought new textbooks not long before the adoption of the Common Core. Teachers had adapted by supplementing these textbooks with CCSS-aligned materials from other sources.
- **Teachers said that the Common Core has changed instruction in positive ways.** Some teachers are placing greater emphasis on teaching thinking skills to students and asking students to explain or justify why they did something or how they solved a problem.
- **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.** For example, some teachers reported that students have fewer opportunities to learn through play, art, and other activities. This has reduced outlets for student creativity and diminished opportunities for younger students to acquire important social and emotional skills by playing and interacting with others, teachers said.

Teacher Collaboration to Prepare for CCSS Implementation

As a starting point to prepare for the Common Core, focus group participants said they collaborated with other teachers to review the standards and then develop aligned curricula. These sessions might be formal meetings organized by the district or school, or informal meetings of grade-level teams. A Utah teacher described the process in this way:

> *We all sat down as teams and we combed through that Core, and we found everything that was new or changed to make sure that we were teaching the new Core and understanding what was in it.*

Another Utah teacher said that she and a team of colleagues "spent a lot of time" working to comprehend the standards, a process that included highlighting the action words to be sure to grasp the main ideas. A Wisconsin focus group participant said teachers in her school worked to "pull apart" and "really study the standards" before they started revising curriculum. An Illinois teacher described how her peer group analyzed the standards to "figure out what was underlying all of them" and then tried to find learning activities to teach them.

According to teachers from multiple focus groups, part of the standards review involved identifying and analyzing the most important standards — the core skills. A Wisconsin teacher described the challenge faced by a group of 5th grade teachers as they tried to identify core skills in math: "I remember sitting here and going, 'Okay, so let's think of life skills, what are [students] going to need to know after school?'" Later, after gaining more experience with teaching the standards, these teachers went back and revised some of their ideas about what constituted the core skills.

In some schools, this early work on the standards and aligned curricula had a positive and ongoing effect on teacher collaboration. In the Delaware focus group district, one teacher explained that the lack of alignment between the CCSS and existing curriculum "forced us to work closer together" on developing materials to teach the standards. Another teacher in the same school agreed: "The grade levels really came together and said, 'Okay, this is what we have and this is what we need to do, and now we've got do that.'" This collaboration was encouraged by both the principal and the teachers themselves, according to focus group participants.

In some schools, this spirit of collaboration carried over and influenced the instructional process:

> **A Delaware teacher:** *When I came here and everyone was working together, I was like, "My God, this is like heaven!" I mean, because everyone was sharing everything and [saying], "Hey, that didn't work for you, so let me show you what I did."*

> **An Illinois teacher:** *Our kindergarten team has worked really hard on collaboration on how to implement the Common Core … We work together on our long-term plan to make sure that we're all doing the same thing — not teaching exactly the same way, but covering the same material the same week …*

Professional Development to Prepare for Implementation

In four focus group districts, teachers indicated they had received some type of district- or state-provided professional development or coaching to help them implement the Common Core (as well as training on assessments, as discussed later).

"We had a lot of in-service" on the CCSS, said a Delaware teacher, including professional development on the differences between the Common Core and the previous state standards and what these shifts in expectations mean for instruction. Several Delaware teachers reported attending various types of state-sponsored professional development. A Delaware teacher made a point of noting that local administrators had been supportive during this process: "Our administrators are really good at reading us and listening to us, and then they make adjustments to help us get where we need to be."

One Delaware focus group teacher participated in the Delaware Dream Team,[1] an intense professional development opportunity designed to develop teacher leadership to support the Common Core. Part of the Dream Team commitment is for these teacher-leaders to share what they have learned with others in their districts and schools, including information on "how to maneuver through these new standards and the shifts in focus, and what a classroom is going to look like now," the teacher explained.

Wisconsin teachers said their district brought in experts as needed to help guide committees of teachers with developing CCSS-aligned curriculum. "If we have a question, we bring in somebody who tells us the right way to do it," said a teacher. These Wisconsin teachers also reported receiving some training on standards and formative assessments. In addition, this district purchased a "build your own curriculum" tool, according to one teacher, to serve as a repository for teacher-developed resources across the district. "Eventually everything will be on there, and there will be a gatekeeper that's in charge, and everything will be the most current," a teacher explained.

Utah teachers said they could attend state and district training sessions on the standards, as well as a state-sponsored Summer Core Academy to support teachers in providing high-quality instruction that is consistent with state standards.

In an Illinois focus group, one teacher said that in the early stages of standards implementation, she and her colleagues got little support from the district. Teachers were given the standards and told to "figure out how to teach them and how to assess them," she said. Eventually, said another focus group participant, the elementary teachers in this district received help with the standards from professional RTI (Response to Intervention) coaches, who clarified some of the "foggier" standards and demonstrated what a CCSS-aligned lesson might look like. But these coaches were eliminated due to funding issues, that teacher added.

1 See http://www.doe.k12.de.us/site/Default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&PageID=1&ViewID=047e-6be3-6d87-4130-8424-d8e4e9ed6c2a&FlexDataID=15999

Aligning Curriculum to the CCSS

What the Survey Said

School districts were the source of standards-aligned curriculum cited by the highest percentages of elementary teachers. About 77% of elementary teachers of state math standards and 74% of teachers of state ELA standards reported receiving curricula or curriculum frameworks from the district. Smaller proportions of elementary teachers reported receiving standards-based curricula from their state (38% math, 39% ELA) and/or from their school (29% in both math and ELA).

Teachers themselves are also an important source of standards-aligned curricula. Of the elementary teachers who taught their state's standards, about half (50% for math, 54% ELA) said they worked independently or with other teachers to develop or revise curricula aligned to the standards or to adapt curricula from online sources or existing materials.

Table 1. Curricular resources for teaching state math and ELA standards in 2015-16

	Math	ELA
My state provided me with curricula/curriculum frameworks	38%	39%
My district provided me with curricula/curriculum frameworks	77%	74%
My school provided me with curricula/curriculum frameworks	29%	29%
I developed or revised curricula myself or with other teachers, or adapted curricula from online resources or existing materials	50%	54%

Table reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who reported teaching their state's current math standards in 2015-16, an estimated 38% said their state had provided them with curricula/curriculum frameworks for teaching the standards.

Note: Teachers could give more than one response to this question about curriculum sources.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

The focus group comments confirmed the survey findings that teachers themselves are an important source of curricula aligned to state standards. In all of the focus groups, teachers reported developing or revising some standards-aligned curricula themselves or finding curricular materials on their own.

It appears that teachers' role in developing or finding aligned curricula was often due to necessity rather than choice. Several teachers from different states reported that in the early years of standards implementation they had not received standards-aligned curricula from their district and that few materials were available from other sources. Some teachers added that they had to buy materials out of their own pockets to teach the standards. The following comments illustrate this situation:

A Utah teacher: *They didn't give us any of the math curriculum. I was just going through each standard … and finding whatever I could find for that standard and using it.*

A Delaware teacher: *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.*

An Illinois teacher: *I feel like we jumped right into [the standards], but didn't have, necessarily, the resources to help us address them in the classroom … I feel like they need to have resources in place, whether it's curricula or a little bit more of a clearer guideline of what needs to be taught … They should have those curricula first, whereas I feel like they throw the standards out and then the curricula follow behind it.*

A Wisconsin teacher: *As a district, we can't buy any curriculum, and the district decision has been to create our own curriculum for each and every grade — teacher-created.*

In the Wisconsin site, teachers said the district decision for committees of teachers to develop aligned curriculum, brought some logistical problems because the committees met during the day, and teachers had to get a substitute. According to one teacher, they were not paid extra for this committee work unless it occurred over the summer. "A lot of sweat and emotions go into this, big time," this teacher said.

In one of the Illinois districts, decisions about curricula were made districtwide. Teachers from across the district started creating curriculum units aligned to the Common Core during the summer, according to one teacher, although they have still not finished developing curriculum for all of the literacy standards. As the units were developed, they were given to other teachers in that grade.

Delaware focus group participants explained that with adoption of the Common Core, they became much more involved in developing curricula. Three or four teachers at each grade level from across the district served on committees that wrote curricula for the Common Core and developed aligned assessments that teachers could use. The existing professional learning communities played an important role in this process, they said.

In some other districts, teachers worked informally, in groups and on their own, whenever they could find time. In the Utah site, for example, teachers said they shared and developed curricular materials during their professional learning community meetings and their individual preparation time.

Revising, developing, and obtaining CCSS-aligned curricula has been a challenge for teachers in all sites. Focus group participants mentioned several particular challenges:

- **Lack of expertise in curriculum development.** Some teachers reported feeling inadequately prepared for this type of curriculum design, especially in the early years of standards implementation. "We're not curriculum experts," said a Wisconsin teacher. A Delaware teacher made this observation:

  I don't think there was a lot of training given for how to write curriculum for the general teacher. I think administrators in the district office, those people had training in it, but I know from teaching middle school, we were not ever trained on how to take the standards and write a curriculum. They just said, "Here's your standards, here's your books, and go ahead." And I think that was difficult …

- **Need for better examples of student work.** Teachers in another Illinois district met during the summer before the standards were implemented to build units for the literacy curriculum, but "we were kind of going in blind," said one focus group participant. This teacher suggested it would have been helpful in designing curricula and lesson plans if teachers could have seen samples of student work that demonstrated mastery of a particular standard:

  I knew what the standards were, but I didn't know the background of them … I didn't actually know … the expectation behind that standard … I feel like it would have been beneficial to get some student work or some sort of sample work that aligns with both [math and ELA] standards.

- **Time involved.** Several teachers emphasized that changing curriculum and instruction to align with standards is a time-consuming process and at times a "very painful" one, as a Wisconsin teacher noted. Although the CCSS have been in place for a few years, it takes considerable time to align curricula for all the standards; "we are just getting our math units ready," said another Wisconsin teacher.

- **Need for ongoing revision.** In more than one site, teachers reported that after gaining experience in teaching the standards, they realized they could improve on their initial attempts to develop CCSS-aligned curricula. In an effort to make their materials better, some teachers said they went back and revised their curricula or pacing guides.

Textbook Alignment

Some teachers reported that existing curricula and textbooks were not well-aligned with new standards, and teachers often had to supplement them with other materials. Teachers in these states explained that their districts had made major curriculum purchases shortly before the shift to the Common Core and therefore lacked the funding or incentive to buy new aligned curricula.

In one Illinois district, teachers explained that the reading series in place when the Common Core was adopted was not aligned with the new standards, and the district could not afford to buy a new curriculum right away. As a result, said a teacher, "we were kind of picking and choosing what met the standards" from the existing curriculum and supplementing it with materials the teachers developed or revised themselves or obtained from various sources. Another participant pointed out that "it almost gives you the freedom to say, 'Okay, you know what? This story from this textbook stinks, so I'm totally going to pull this.'" In math, the textbook series being used in this same district was billed as CCSS-aligned, but the content was not challenging enough for certain standards, according to a participant, so teachers were pulling in materials previously used in a higher grade.

Similarly, a Wisconsin teacher said that some of the content in the existing math textbooks was "completely off," so committees of teachers were finding and developing supplemental materials. However, said another Wisconsin participant, it's really up to individual teachers to decide how much to supplement the existing commercial text with additional materials.

A Utah teacher described a situation in which existing curriculum had been put in place before the new standards. Because the district was unable to replace this curriculum with CCSS-aligned curricula, teachers had to analyze the standards, write lesson plans, and pull together curricular materials:

We had just gotten a new reading program, and it cost so much money to replace that reading program, so that wasn't going to happen, even though the core changed … I've been teaching from what I can find on my own for a while now.

A focus group participant in an Illinois district said that although the district had bought a math series that was described as being aligned to the Common Core, the district initially refused to buy the teachers' manuals that went along with curriculum. "We were given the new workbook and had to guess what it was we were teaching." Since then, the district has acquired manuals, she said.

Some lack of alignment with commercial materials is to be expected, said one Illinois teacher. "Nobody's going to sell every single thing that we want curriculum-wise."

In Delaware, the focus group district had only recently adopted new CCSS-aligned curricula. Previously, teachers in this district had been using textbooks that were not aligned to the CCSS, and therefore they leaned heavily on curricula they had developed or adapted themselves. The district adopted a new CCSS-aligned curriculum in math in 2015-16 and is using a new CCSS-aligned ELA curriculum for the first time in 2016-17. Teachers appeared to like the new math curriculum and said it has brought more uniformity to the district. Delaware teachers may still need to supplement the district's commercial curricula with their own materials to teach some standards, however.

Availability of Curricula from Other Sources

Teachers are obtaining aligned curricula from multiple sources, including commercial vendors, web resources, other teachers, and other CCSS-adopting states and districts. The availability of resources has improved since the early years of the Common Core, according to participants. Initially, "the resources weren't there before Common Core was implemented everywhere," said an Illinois teacher, so they used what they and their colleagues could pull together. Recently, however, teachers in this district reported finding many useful materials from various sources.

Several teachers reported obtaining curricular materials online. A few teachers in different districts had positive comments about teacher-sponsored websites that offer curriculum units created by teachers, sometimes for a fee. Others found "friendly" and "phenomenal" resources they liked from other CCSS-adopting states, including New York, North Carolina, and Maryland.

A Utah teacher also described how, after investing so much effort in developing aligned curricula, she was delighted to find a host of good materials that met her needs from teacher-oriented publishers like Scholastic: "My co-workers and I spent a lot of time developing our lessons, and then all of a sudden it's like, Here it is! … That's been really nice."

Impact of the Common Core on Instruction

Instruction has changed since adoption of the CCSS, but teachers had different descriptions of how it has changed. In Utah, teachers reported that under the new standards, they are emphasizing the teaching of thinking, or "metacognitive," skills and asking students to explain or justify why they did something. Under previous standards, one teacher explained, "You just teach them how to do it and not to question why, just do or die," but now "we're teaching for understanding." The new standards have also required teachers to teach students a "special vocabulary" in ELA and math. In math, one teacher reported changing from saying "borrowing and carrying" to

using "ungrouping and grouping." Another Utah teacher said that the changes to her instruction — namely, emphasizing the teaching of thinking skills — were initially made because she had learned more about "research-based practices," and the Common Core reinforced those changes.

An Illinois teacher said that in math, it has not been that difficult to make the instructional shift to the Common Core. Another Illinois teacher reported that 2nd grade reading instruction has not changed that much because the emphasis is still on helping students read better. However, a kindergarten teacher in this same district spoke of the stress associated with trying to teach everything in the standards even though students learn at different paces — especially in a half-day kindergarten program, which does not allow enough time.

Impact of Academic Standards on Learning Social and Emotional Skills

Several teachers made the point that the emphasis on rigorous academic standards has reduced time for art and other activities not specifically tied to the standards. Some teachers said this shift has reduced opportunities for students to exercise creativity and, especially in the early grades, to learn important social, emotional, and life skills. A Wisconsin 2nd grade teacher explained this problem:

> *The kids have no social skills at all to deal with problems… And I've heard tons of teachers that have been teaching for a long time say that overall there's a degradation in people skills. And it's because we don't have time in kindergarten to teach them how to share. And they don't have time to play and act out those emotions and things … The rigor that's supposed to make it better is kicking us.*

A 5th grade teacher added:

> *And we see in 5th grade, because those social skills weren't taught in kindergarten, that when we do small group or discussion or debate, they can't do it. They'll fight or they just sit there. But yeah, I do see a lot more mental health issues in the school.*

Several teachers regretted the loss of time for students to learn such skills as getting along, being patient, sharing, helping struggling classmates, and engaging in discussion and debate. A Wisconsin teacher also bemoaned the lack of time in the early grades for students to practice fine motor skills; as a result, she said, "I have 5th graders that can't cut on a line."

An Illinois kindergarten teacher pointed to how the emphasis on academics in her grade has eliminated opportunities for younger children to learn through play:

> *When I came here I had a kitchen in my classroom and I had a puppet theater and I had the dress-up area. After Common Core started coming in, we were told, "Eh, you might want to start getting rid of those things." And I still have my food and I still have my pots and pans. My kitchen is gone, my puppet theater is gone. What I'm finding, especially this year with the group of kids that I have … they need [those creative and play experiences] in order to get their minds prepared to do the paper and pencil kind of stuff. And they're still doing paper and pencil stuff in centers and they're being creative but … it's not at all developmentally appropriate for kindergarten … That "fluff" — even though it's not — had to go by the wayside because there's just not time for it.*

Teacher Autonomy under New Standards

What the Survey Said

Most elementary teachers (62% in math, 63% in ELA) who taught their state's previous standards and now teach more rigorous state standards said their autonomy over instructional strategies has stayed the same or increased with the adoption of new state standards. A majority of these teachers reported stable or greater autonomy over curriculum development (57% math, 59% ELA) and collaboration with other teachers (72% in both math and ELA). The specific percentages are shown below.

Figure 1. Elementary school teachers' autonomy under current state standards compared with previous standards

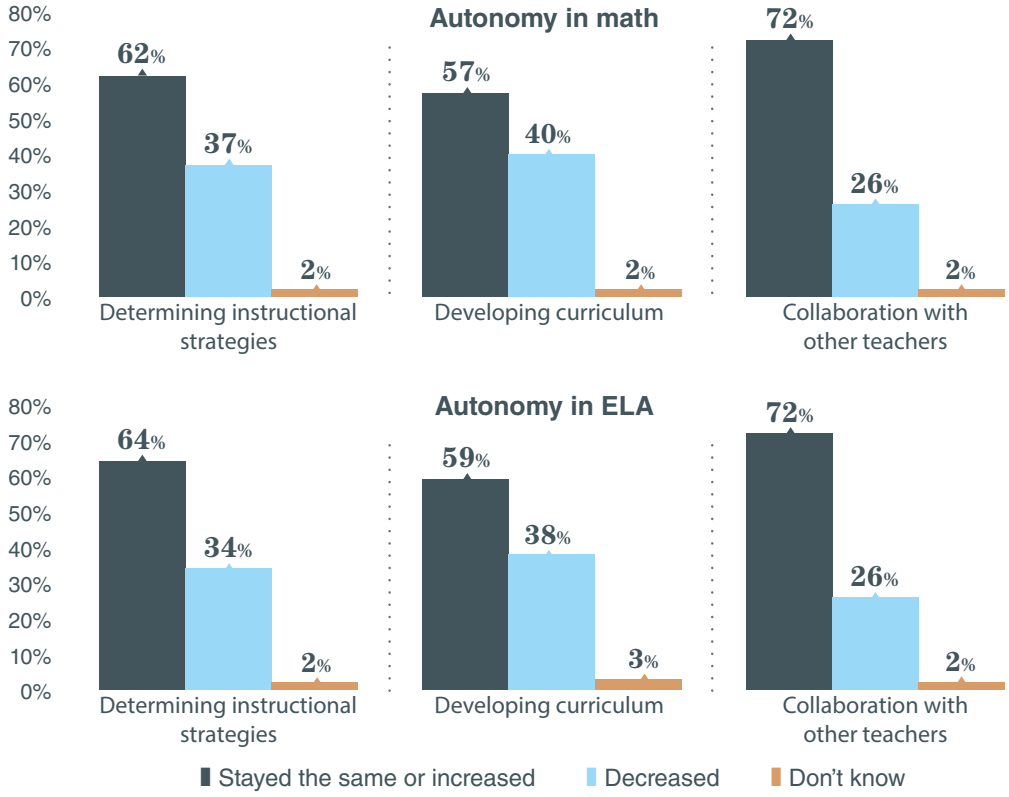

Figure reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who taught both the previous and current state standards in math, an estimated 29% said their level of autonomy over instructional strategies has increased with the change to the current standards.

Note: Percentages do not always total 100% due to rounding.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

The focus group discussion added nuances to the survey findings and revealed some divergent opinions among teachers about their level of autonomy under the Common Core. These differences in opinion may be related to variations in state or district contexts.

A few teachers noted that directions about how to teach the Common Core standards started out being more prescriptive but have loosened over time. A Wisconsin teacher explained this dynamic:

> *When we were first starting to work with [the new standards] it was very rigid … there wasn't a lot of room for teacher creativity or even really doing what we thought would help the students learn it more. But I think this year we're kind of turning a corner … we have more opportunity … I think that it's more open now.*

Part of this may be because the teachers themselves are becoming more aware of and comfortable with various strategies for teaching the content in the standards. One Wisconsin teacher reported "being able to put some of my own spin on it" now.

In a similar vein, a Delaware teacher described the initial fears raised by some colleagues that teachers "couldn't teach what they wanted" and "were all going to be uniform because of the Common Core." But after working with the standards, teachers have come to see that these concerns were unfounded.

A Utah teacher described the level of autonomy under the Common Core as "about the same" as under the state's previous standards. Another Utah teacher reported having ample flexibility and clarified that although the content of the new standards is laid out with specificity, the methods for teaching them are not. The teacher explained that "because I know exactly what I have to teach and then I've got all these different strategies, I feel like I'm reaching more kids" than before.

A few teachers said they have less autonomy under the new standards but attributed this to the nature of the Common Core. One Wisconsin teacher indicated that the previous standards were "very broad" and "had a lot of wiggle room." Another Wisconsin teacher explained that under the previous state standards, "you could justify anything," so a shift to more precision was helpful.

Assessments Aligned to the Common Core

Key Focus Group Findings

- **Elementary teachers in the focus groups said the information they received from the state about their students' performance on state summative assessments was not very helpful.** Some teachers said that they only received a single score for each student, which was not enough to help teachers understand the specific areas where students were struggling or how to adjust instruction in the future. Those teachers who did receive more detailed information found the data difficult to navigate. Many teachers in the focus groups were left to analyze the testing reports on their own. However, two of the teachers in one focus group had received training from the state on how to use the state assessment data portal, and these teachers found the data more helpful than did their peers.

- **Teachers do find data from other assessments useful and use these tests throughout the year to measure student mastery of the standards and to guide their instruction.** Many teachers indicated that the timing of the state summative exams is not helpful in informing their practice because the tests are administered at the end of the school year and teachers receive the results after the students have moved on to the next grade. Instead, some of the focus group teachers have developed CCSS-aligned assessments for use during the school year, while others rely on state or district-provided exams to help guide their instruction.
- **Many of the teachers in the focus groups have concerns about the state summative math and ELA assessments.** Some teachers said that testing takes too long and puts children under too much stress. They worried that the keyboarding skills of their students, especially 3rd graders, are not strong enough to be used on the test. Teachers in one of the focus groups were concerned about the validity of the results when some students are taking paper-and-pencil tests while others are taking tests on computers, which may be more engaging for students.

As noted earlier, the four focus group states have taken different approaches to assessing students' mastery of the CCSS:

- Delaware is administering Smarter Balanced assessments.
- Illinois is administering the PARCC assessments.
- Utah is using its own state tests aligned to the Common Core standards.
- Wisconsin administered the Smarter Balanced assessments in 2015, but decided to use its own CCSS-aligned exam for future years.

Resources for Understanding State Assessment Results

What the Survey Said

On CEP's nationally representative teacher survey, most elementary teachers who teach math and/or ELA reported that they had received student performance data from the spring 2015 administration of their state's math and/or ELA assessments. Specifically, 70% of these teachers reported receiving the assessment data in math, and 71% said they received the data in ELA. (Some elementary teachers do not receive state assessment results because they teach grades that are not tested — only students in grade 3 and above are tested.)

The CEP survey also asked teachers who had received student results from the spring 2015 assessment what resources they were employing to understand how to use the performance data to inform their instruction. Large majorities of teachers said they worked with other teachers in

their school, engaged in self-study, and/or participated in professional development. The specific responses are shown in the table below.

Figure 2. Resources being used by elementary school teachers to understand student assessment data

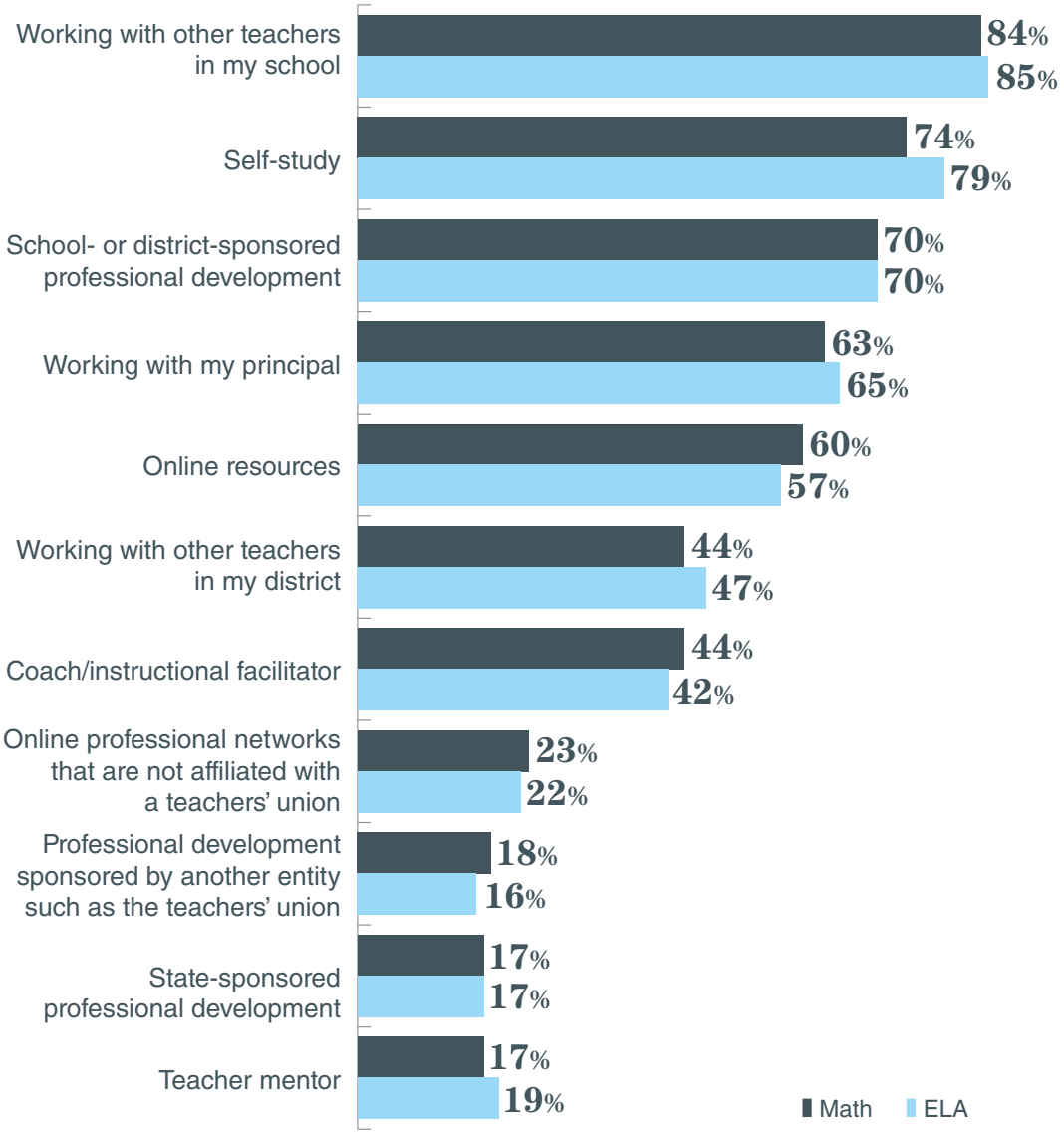

Figure reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who reported that they teach the math standards and that they had received student data from the spring 2015 math assessment, an estimated 84% said they are working with other teachers in their school to understand the assessment data.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

Teachers in most of the focus groups reported using resources similar to those identified by survey participants to understand state testing data. Most of the focus group teachers said they engaged in self-study or worked with other teachers to understand state assessment results, while a few teachers indicated that they also participated in professional development provided by state or district officials. Two Utah teachers participated in the state's Assessment to Achievement program, which aims to increase teachers' abilities to analyze and use data to inform instruction.[2] Participants in this two-year program share what they have learned with other teachers in their school. Teachers in Delaware said that they did not receive any training on how to use the Smarter Balanced score reports.

Reporting and Usefulness of State Assessment Data

Much of the focus group discussion centered on how student assessment data was reported to teachers and how useful this information was to inform practice. Many teachers found the assessment data confusing, as illustrated by this Illinois teacher's comment:

> *I remember it was during a staff meeting. We were kind of just discussing the [assessment] report … and there were just a lot of questions regarding what the numbers meant, what the colors meant — they were confusing … And in the end it doesn't give you anything more than "He's at grade level, above grade level…"*

Another teacher added:

> *[The data] doesn't help you at all. It really does not, because I want to know exactly how each kid who is in my class did, so I can see where the bonuses and the deficits are, so I can inform my teaching with the results.*

Across the focus groups, many teachers said they would like to receive detailed reports to help them understand which concepts students had mastered and which ones still needed work, but many teachers just received a single score for each student. A teacher in Utah said she reviewed the student assessment reports that the state provides to parents because they were more useful to her. But because the parent report focused only on a single student, it was difficult to see classroom trends on a computer screen. When she asked the principal if she could make copies of each parent report to get a better understanding of her students' performance, the principal said no because of the cost.

Teachers in Delaware agreed that the in-depth parent reports would be a useful resource for understanding their students' outcomes on the state tests, particularly since teachers currently receive just a single score. "It just gives us the score, it doesn't give any relation to either average or below average," explained one teacher.

In Wisconsin and Utah, many teachers noted that the test score information on their state's web site was time-consuming to access and difficult to comprehend. Other teachers may be facing

2 For more information, see http://www.schools.utah.gov/assessment/Achievement.aspx

similar challenges with the student test data they receive from their state, since many states are posting assessment data online for teachers to access.[3]

Teachers in one of the Illinois focus groups explained that they did not use the 2015 PARCC test data to guide their instruction because it was the first time the test had been administered. This comment shows the dilemma:

> *We looked at the scores. We didn't dive much into them because we approached it as if, "This is the first year of PARCC. We're going to see how it goes." And we had no idea how the scores were coming back to us and … when the scores would come back to us. So we looked at them and then kind of pushed them aside.*

Another teacher added, "We didn't use [the PARCC results] to guide instruction. We take MAP [Measures of Academic Progress] testing as well, so I feel like we kind of use that more than PARCC."

Teachers in Delaware voiced similar sentiments, noting that spring 2015 was the first administration of the Smarter Balanced exam in the state, so the results were essentially baseline information. They did use other district-provided CCSS-aligned assessment results to guide their instruction during the 2015-16 school year.

Third grade teachers in some focus groups said they did not receive state assessment results because their students' scores were sent to the 4th grade teachers, who would have the students next school year, while incoming students from 2nd grade were not tested.

Several teachers in different focus groups noted that the timing of the assessments was problematic. One Utah teacher's observation captures the views of several teachers:

> *One of the biggest problems … is that we are comparing apples to oranges. 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. So, was it our teaching, or was it the group of students? Now, if we had enough data to look at every single year and say, "Okay, every single year, I am weak on fractions," then that's my problem. But I cannot adapt instruction if I am teaching all year long, and then give the test, and then figure out over the summer how I am going to improve the kids that I just had.*

Teachers in Illinois explained that they receive the data reports in the fall. This prompted one teacher to suggest that the test data should be provided in the summer to enable them to adjust their curricula and instructional strategies before school begins.

Some teachers in Illinois wondered why the test is even given if it they don't receive useful data to inform their teaching. "So we don't know what it's for, parents don't know what it's for, kids don't know what it's for — so what is it for?" asked one teacher. Another made this comment about the state assessment:

3 To better understand if the use of state assessment data portals is unique to the focus group states or is a more common practice among state departments of education, CEP contacted directors of assessment in nine states: Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island. These nine states were contacted because they were close to "typical" states based on our metric. We asked the state officials to A) share a sample report of ELA and math summative test data that would be provided to teachers and B) if they could not provide a sample report, describe how they share ELA and math assessment data with teachers. We received responses from state directors of instruction in Idaho, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. Of the five states that responded to our request, all five said that they provide student assessment results to teachers through a secure online portal.

The way it happens, it just feels like it dictates everything. It makes us feel like we're being held back. Like, we're being held back from what we could be doing as educators. That's what we don't like about it.

How Teachers Use State Testing Data to Inform Instruction

What the Survey Said

The majority of elementary school teachers reported using the spring 2015 assessment data to modify their practice at least somewhat (approximately 67% for math, 68% for ELA). The largest proportion of elementary school teachers responded that the data caused them to modify their practice "somewhat" (41% for math, 45% for ELA), while smaller proportions said the data caused to change their practice "to a great extent" or "minimally."

Among the elementary school teachers who said they used state math and/or ELA test data to any extent to inform instruction, about three-fourths reported using the data to differentiate instruction based on student needs. And about two-thirds said they used the data to improve whole class instruction. A minority of elementary teachers used the data to revise curricula.

Figure 3. How elementary school teachers used spring 2015 state test data to modify their practice

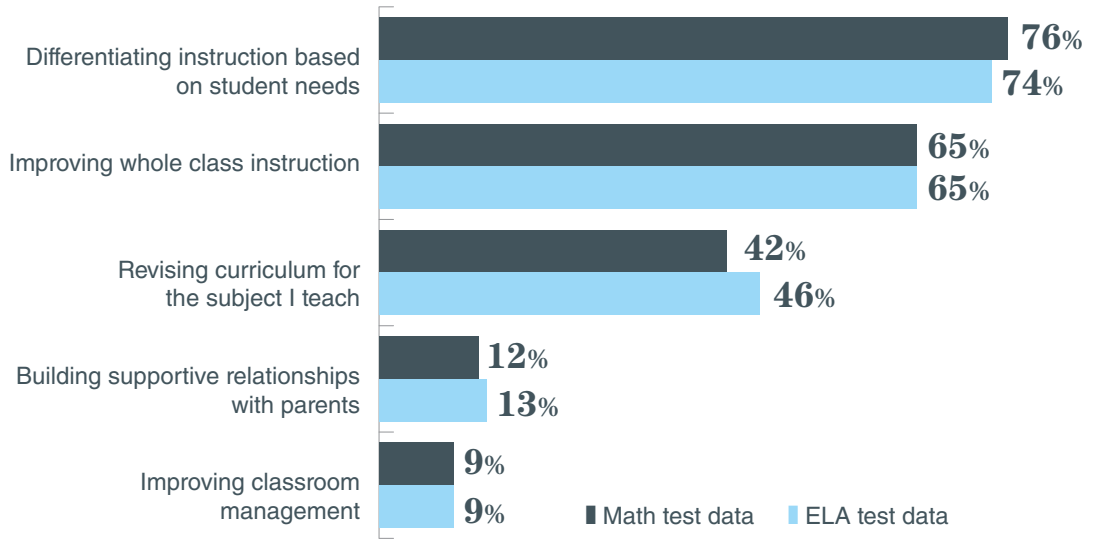

Figure reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who reported that they are teaching state math standards, have received student data from their state's 2015 math assessment, and have used the data to modify their practice, an estimated 76% said they are using test data to help them differentiate instruction based on student needs.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

Although most teachers in the focus groups said the data they received from the spring 2015 math and ELA assessments was inadequate, some reported that they nevertheless used the data to change their practice.

In Utah, a teacher described working with her grade-level colleague to review data from the state's Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence (SAGE) and make instructional adjustments; her professional learning community also devoted time to this purpose. Another Utah teacher explained that she and her colleagues looked at the 2015 overall scores and determined that their ELA scores were not as good as their math and science scores. Consequently, they spent more time in school year 2015-16 working with students on writing and nonfiction reading. A third Utah teacher, who had participated in a state program to train teachers to use and understand the SAGE scores, said she visited another school that scored well on the state reading test to observe how they taught reading. She said that because of the state training, she was able to identify which skills she needed to work on.

A few of the teachers in the Utah focus group reported that although they had taken steps to modify their practice based on the 2015 assessment data, their student test scores did not always increase. One teacher explained that when test data indicates that her students do not understand a concept, she focuses on changing her instruction in those few key areas. "I'll find two or three things that I want to work on from the past year, and I'll spend the summer trying to redevelop, find more resources, and then bring that into the next school year," she said. Last summer, this teacher took some courses on close reading and writing from texts so she "could start this year knowing how to teach it." Despite these efforts, she said her students' scores on the 2016 reading assessment "tanked," but their writing scores increased.

Another teacher shared her school's experience: in an effort to improve writing scores, the school's leadership brought in someone from the state office. Among other things, the state official provided professional development opportunities that focused on grading SAGE writing passages and asked the participant to showcase her instructional approach for other teachers in the school. But when the test scores came in this year, the school's writing scores were lower than in 2015.

Students in Wisconsin have taken different state math and ELA summative assessments for each of the past three years (2013, 2014, and 2015). This situation led one teacher to remark, "In a perfect world, we have the same test every year, we look at what they're not doing well on, and we fix it." Other teachers agreed and noted that is what they did in the four years before 2013 when the state had the same test in place.

Other Assessments Teachers Use to Gauge Students' Learning of State Standards

Focus group teachers discussed other assessments they use throughout the year to guide instruction. In Illinois, some teachers found the MAP test to be helpful for informing instruction. The MAP is a computer adaptive test, which means that the questions given to an individual student are adjusted in difficulty based on how well the student performed on earlier questions. One teacher explained the benefits of the quick scoring and detailed information provided by the MAP:

> *MAP testing is given two to three times a year… By choosing the answers [the students] do, the test changes itself, so it just differentiates for each kid. They fall on an RIT score … and it's immediate; I get it that day … For literacy, it's broken down between nonfiction, fiction, and vocabulary, so it gives me*

their strands, and it gives me their strengths and weaknesses throughout those strands, for both math and reading. And it gives us their growth target, so the low students get a growth target, and the high students get a growth target.

Other teachers in Illinois said that the easyCBM test provides quick and useful results. This benchmark assessment, given three times a year, comes with a curriculum that includes assessment probes, which teachers can administer weekly. One teacher described what she liked about the test:

I do find value in being able to have a snapshot and looking left and looking right and saying, "How is this student doing compared to their peers at the school" … The easyCBM compares them to anyone else who takes that test nationally, so you do have percentages. You can see where they're at, percentagewise.

Utah teachers mentioned that DIBELS provided helpful feedback on student literacy.

In one Illinois district, teachers discussed how they developed grade-level assessments to measure student mastery of the CCSS. They expressed some concern about the lack of uniformity across the grades and about other problems with the teacher-developed assessments. One teacher cited a particular source of confusion:

They ask the kids three different times … in the assessment, in different ways, "How is this text structured?" And it's one of those things where, for kids who are getting that, they might almost be confused because they're being asked three times, "What's the structure?" [and may think] that they're supposed to give a different answer …

In Wisconsin, some elementary teachers use common formative assessments, created at the district level by teachers, to pretest and test students multiple times during the school year to determine if they are proficient. A teacher explained:

We're supposed to reteach until they get it and then continually test that throughout the year. So they could all get it after you teach it and then you maybe later test them on it and they don't get it, then you have to reteach again.

However, one teacher observed that the language on the common formative assessments is not "friendly" to 3rd graders. And the scores that students receive on the assessments can vary depending on which teacher is grading the exam. One teacher explained: "Someone may say they have a 0, no concept, but another teacher may say, well, that's a 1, meaning they're beginning — which is confusing, not friendly." Another problem is that teachers often tweak the exam, so they are no longer common across grade levels. Further, one teacher expressed concern that teachers are not prepared to develop the common assessments:

We went to college for teaching, we know what strategies to use, we can write a simple test on information that we want to know that the kids know, but as far as something that is so important as a standard … we really don't have the education to be writing these things.

Teachers in Delaware reported using CCSS-aligned interim assessments, such as Bridges Math, DIBELS, and STAR for reading and math, to guide their instruction throughout the school year. Of the Bridges Math, one teacher said the following:

I think in general, we did an awesome job of using our new math program, Bridges. [It] has assessments where you can input on an Excel spreadsheet and then it helps us to see where the needs are, class-wise, and we use that a lot.

Test Preparation

What the Survey Said

On average, elementary teachers reported spending an estimated 13.7 days yearly preparing students for district-mandated tests and 14.8 days preparing students for state-mandated tests. In the survey, "preparing" was defined as drilling on specific content and skills covered on the tests, using practice tests, or teaching test-taking skills such as time-management, pacing, and other strategies.

An estimated 30% of elementary school teachers reported spending one week or less per year on test-prep for district-mandated tests, while 31% reported spending more than one month on these activities. For state-mandated tests, 24% indicated they spent a week or less preparing students while 35% spent more than a month.

Figure 4. Elementary school teacher-estimated time per year spent preparing students for mandated tests

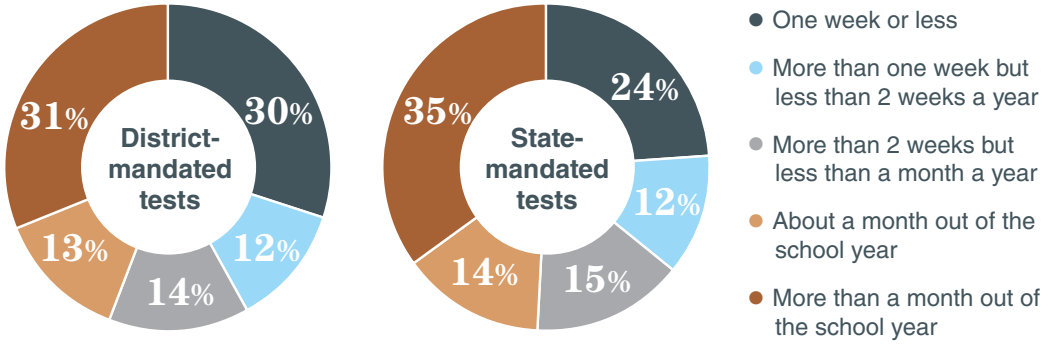

Figure reads: An estimated 30% of public elementary school teachers whose students take district- or state-mandated tests reported spending one week or less per year preparing students to take district-mandated tests, and about 24% spend one week or less per year preparing students for state-mandated tests.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

Note: The survey defined "preparing" students for tests as drilling students on specific content and skills covered on the tests, using practice tests, and/or teaching test-taking skills such as time management, pacing, and other strategies.

Most elementary school teachers surveyed believe that too much time is spent preparing students for district- (54%) and state-mandated (66%) tests. An estimated 37% of teachers said the amount of time they take to get students ready for district-required tests is about right, and 24% felt that way about test-prep for state-mandated tests. Only about 5% of elementary school teachers felt they spent too little time preparing students for either district- or state-mandated exams, and a small percentage did not know.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

We did not ask focus group participants to calculate the amount of time spent on test preparation activities, but we did ask them if they included test preparation in their instruction and what type of activities they used.

Focus group teachers reported using various approaches to prepare students for state math and ELA exams. In Utah, some teachers said that the computer specialist, rather than the classroom teachers, engaged students in test-preparation activities such as taking practice tests, becoming familiar with the computer-based format, and working on keyboarding skills. In Wisconsin, a teacher said she discussed the features of the computer-based tests with students during their school breakfast time, and then she took the students to the computer lab the next day where they could play with the different features of the exam. Illinois teachers also said they reviewed the features of the exam with their students, telling students "you can highlight; you can X out answers; you can kind of scratch lines off."

Another Illinois teacher explained that her school had purchased Chromebooks to help students prepare for the state assessment — which also affected her instruction:

> *All of a sudden I had to start assessing the kids on everything with the Chromebooks, because [the school] wanted to prepare them that they were going to be using the computers for writing … And I understand that, that's great, but it's hard to manipulate Chromebooks with 5- and 6-year-olds.*

Other teachers in this focus group concurred that their school leaders wanted the students to get "up to speed" on the technology aspect of the PARCC exam. Teachers also described how they injected test prep into fun activities, such as graphing with Halloween candy.

Another topic in an Illinois focus group was the amount of school time spent preparing students for tests. Some teachers remarked that this took up a lot of time. One teacher explained that in her school, students take the easyCBM test three times a year, as well as PARCC practice tests, and teachers also administer their own assessments.

Some teachers in the Illinois focus groups use the tests that accompany a CCSS-aligned textbook because these tests mirror the format of PARCC. Said one teacher:

> *It helps [students] to understand, because there's never just question 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 anymore. If there are 5 questions, it's really 10 questions, because it's question 1, part A, part B. Question 2, here's your question, here's Roman numeral I, II, III, IV, and then over here is, "Okay, did you like Roman numeral I and II, Roman numeral I and IV, Roman III and I?"*

Another teacher described the sequence of activities used to get students ready for an exam that is not multiple-choice. During the first half of the school year, students are tested using multiple-choice items, but beginning the second half of the year, the teachers use written responses to assess students' knowledge. Then written responses are replaced with high-frequency fill-in-the blank questions. The teacher added:

> *That's more accurate than just multiple-choice to us, because we know that multiple-choice has its place. It does, somewhere, but it just didn't seem that reliable in giving us actually what's accurate, because you can guess, and sometimes people would guess the right answer.*

A Wisconsin teacher said she administers a practice test and shows students a video that explains how to use various features of the computer-based state exam. Teachers also have to read to students four pages of instructions regarding how to take the state assessment, she explained.

Even teachers in some elementary grades that are not tested feel pressure to prepare students for the state exams. In Wisconsin, a 2nd grade teacher discussed how teachers in the upper grades are urging

early elementary teachers to work with students on writing so they will be better prepared in 3rd grade "because they are going to have to do all these responses, write a five-paragraph essay in 3rd grade."

One Utah teacher expressed concerned about teaching to the test:

> *If we're teaching for the purpose of the test, then are we really teaching? Are we doing the craft that we went to school for? Because I didn't. I'm sorry; I beg to differ on that. I did not go to school to teach my children how to take a test.*

Teachers in Delaware had a different view of test-prep activities. While teachers did discuss some direct test-prep activities, such as teaching keyboarding skills or administering practice tests, they agreed that it is difficult to parse the amount of time spent on preparing students for the tests because everything is aligned. For example, a teacher might tell students to include evidence to support their points in a writing assignment because that is what they will have to do on the state test, but the standards also require students to provide detailed responses. "I feel like we're at a point, in all honesty, where we do a lot less direct test preparation, because everything we do is so much better aligned," said one teacher.

Time Students Spend Taking Tests

What the Survey Said

On average, elementary school teachers estimated that students spend 10.5 days per year taking district-mandated tests and 9.1 days taking state-mandated tests.

An estimated 39% of elementary school teachers reported that their students spend one week or less per year taking district-mandated tests while 10% reported spending more than one month. For state-mandated tests, 46% indicated that their students spend a week or less taking these tests while about 7% said their students spend more than a month.

Figure 5. Elementary school teacher-estimated time per year that students spend taking mandated tests

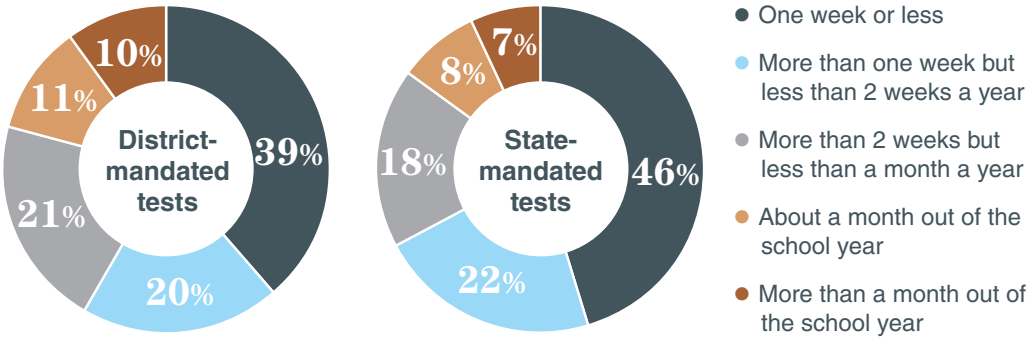

Figure reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who reported that the average student in their class spent some time taking district-mandated assessments, an estimated 39% reported that the average student spent one week or less taking district-mandated tests.

Note: Percentages do not always total 100% due to rounding.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

About 84% of elementary teachers believe that the amount of time their students spend taking district- and state-mandated exams is too much, while 14% indicated that it was about the right amount, and less than 1% said it was too little time.

Figure 6. Elementary school teachers' views on whether the time students spend taking mandated tests is appropriate

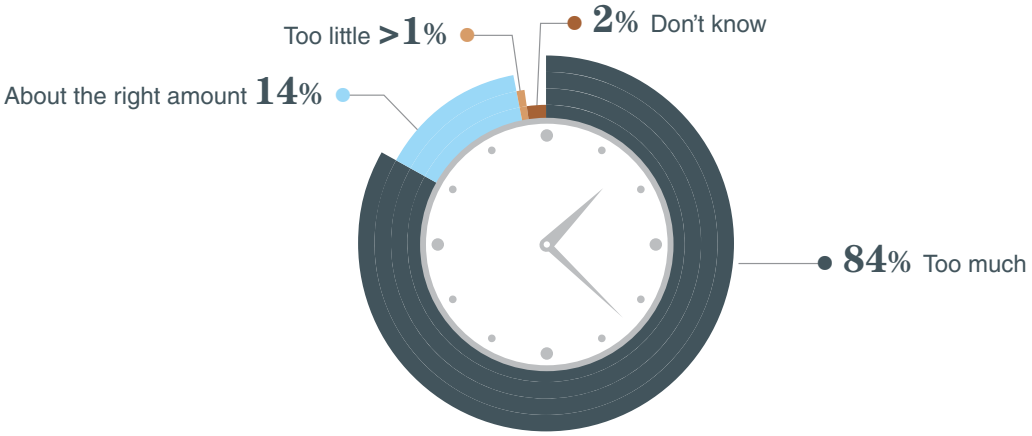

Figure reads: An estimated 84% of public elementary school teachers whose students take district- and/or state-mandated assessments said that too much time is spent taking these tests.

Note: Percentages do not always total 100% due to rounding.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

Teachers' comments in the focus groups echoed the survey findings. One teacher in Illinois noted that there are seven sessions of state testing over two weeks that last between 60 and 90 minutes each. Despite all of that testing time, teachers only received a report noting whether a student was performing at grade level or not. "A conversation with your teacher probably could have grabbed that information," she said, adding that she gets better information from the district-administered MAP computer-adaptive test.

Delaware teachers said that state CCSS-aligned exams in math and ELA are administered over the course of eight days in half-day increments, although the amount of time spent taking the exams can be longer if a student requires an accommodation. In addition, 4th graders take a state social studies exam, and 5th graders take a state science exam, and teachers estimated that practice tests taken by students consume an additional two days. This a long time for students to sit and take tests, so teachers said they start building up students' stamina during the school year. One teacher described the process this way: "We start at the lower grades … if they have to do something for 20 minutes, we try to get them to do it for 25, and then eventually you try to get them to do it for 40." Another teacher added, "You try to get them to write. You start 10 minutes straight writing and then you build it up and — yeah, it takes a lot of stamina to take the Smarter Balanced test."

In Wisconsin, state testing must be completed within a certain time frame, and some focus group participants said they must juggle students' schedules to fit in the assessments. "We have to find time but they can't miss lunch or recess or core classes, or specials," said one teacher. Assessment-related scheduling problems are not limited to Wisconsin. A teacher in Illinois said that due to the amount of time it takes to administer PARCC, everyone's schedule is impacted. She noted that her class had to forego their usual library time because other students were using the library to take the state exam.

Teachers in Utah agreed that the SAGE assessment is too long and that the reading passages and questions were particularly time-consuming.

Exams to Keep, Reduce, or Eliminate

What the Survey Said

Of the elementary teachers who said their students spend too much time taking district- and state-mandated exams, a majority (60% or more) want to see the frequency or length of these exams reduced. Eighty-two percent or more would keep teacher quizzes and/or tests.

Figure 7. Elementary school teachers' views about which tests to keep, reduce, or eliminate

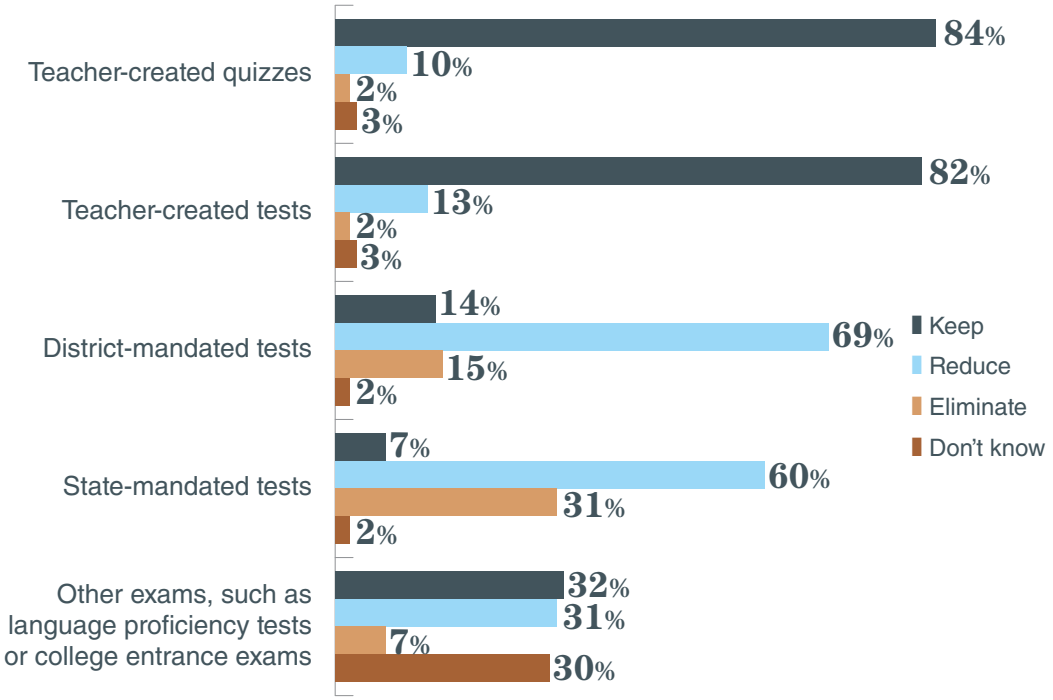

Figure reads: Of the public elementary school teachers who said the average student in their class spends too much time taking district- and/or state-mandated assessments, an estimated 84% wanted to keep their own teacher-created quizzes.

Note: Percentages do not always total 100% due to rounding.

Note: Not all estimated responses shown in this table are statistically different. Confidence intervals for the estimates in this table can be found in the Appendix for this report, available at www.cep-dc.org.

What the Focus Group Teachers Said

Teachers in the Utah focus group agreed that the state test would be better if the reading passages were shorter or fewer in number and if the math assessment were also shortened. One teacher also suggested reducing the frequency of the DIBELS administration. Another Utah teacher suggested eliminating the state elementary science test for this reason:

> *I looked at some of the questions, you know, and I think they're testing to a level that is not appropriate … And even some of the topics that we are having to address and teach children, I wonder about the validity of why we're teaching children in 4th grade about soil profiles, and in 5th grade about genetics.*

Some Illinois teachers questioned the worth of the PARCC exam because they feel they get more valuable information from MAP. Some teachers also pointed out that some of the district-required, CCSS-aligned formative assessments developed by teachers were less helpful than others. "I just don't know if the assessments that we've written as a district are valid or are rigorous enough or directly meet what we're trying to grade them on," said one teacher.

Other teachers in Illinois seemed to agree that the end-of-year state math and ELA summative assessments are not helpful to them. As one teacher explained, "Summative doesn't really do much for us, because we're doing so much formative that it's guiding us, it's guiding our differentiation for the students on what you're doing. Formative for us is the best." One teacher opposed any standardized tests in kindergarten, while another wanted to keep the easyCBM.

A Wisconsin teacher proposed getting rid of districtwide pretests because students don't yet understand the information on which they are being tested. Other teachers talked about assessment overlap with guided reading and PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening). The guided reading takes 30 minutes per student, one teacher said, and with 22 students, that adds up to a lot of classroom time. The guided reading is done by the classroom teacher so substitutes are brought in, but class time is still lost since the substitute teacher is not the same as having the regular teacher.

After discussing three interim assessments given in their district, Delaware teachers decided that the BRIDGES and DIBELS assessments were most helpful for informing instruction. Delaware teachers said that they aren't opposed to the state math and ELA exams, but wished the stakes weren't so high.

Computer-based CCSS-Aligned Assessments

Much of the focus groups discussion about state assessments revolved around the computer-based format. Teachers indicated that students liked the technology associated with the exam, but voiced concern over how disparities in students' computer skills might affect student scores. For example, teachers in one Illinois focus group discussed challenges that some students faced in using computers to take the test, such as difficulties with turning the test pages on the computer. "These are the things you worry about because they can't take the test correctly if they can't turn the page," one teacher commented. Other teachers expressed a more basic concern about how students' poor keyboarding skills can slow them down when taking the tests, which frustrates the students. The school administration wants teachers to teach keyboarding, but they don't have the time, teachers said. A few Illinois teachers wondered whether the state ELA exam was assessing reading skills or computer skills.

Across the focus groups, teachers shared the difficulties that arose because schools did not have enough computers. According to one teacher, the lack of sufficient numbers of computers in her school meant that younger students were often taking tests at the same time as older students. Another teacher expressed concern that schools with too few computers must start testing students earlier in the school year, which means they have less time to prepare students and could see test scores suffer. On a related issue, another teacher was concerned about the comparability of results on computer-based assessments and paper-and-pencil tests, in part because the computer-based tests may be more engaging for students with their use of videos and colorful graphics.

Multiple teachers in Utah and Wisconsin described the "incredible amount of anxiety" experienced by some elementary school students regarding test-taking and test preparation, particularly with the computer-administered aspects of new state tests. Two Utah teachers had the following exchange about young students who get stuck on a test question and become flustered by the computer-adaptive testing:

> **Teacher 1:** *That's the other problem with this adaptive test, if there is no answer, the test doesn't move. So you could theoretically get a child stuck at question number one …*
>
> **Teacher 2:** *It was the second question. He spent 25 minutes bawling, and finally I said, "I don't care what you do on this question. Do something, it can be wrong, and push Next." And he's like, "But I'm going to get it wrong" and I said, "I don't care. I do not care."*
>
> **Teacher 1:** *I know a lot of teachers in our school and in other schools actually have this conversation with the students saying, 'This test does not define you. Please, just don't worry about it.'*

In Wisconsin, teachers reported that the difficulty of the state math assessment is causing students anxiety, as this comment suggests: "The low readers … get stuck on words and they don't know the meaning. So that's where they put on the brakes and you can't help them. So the frustration builds."

Assessment Results and Accountability

Across all focus group sites, several teachers expressed feeling pressure and uncertainty about the high stakes of state testing, the public reporting of test results, and the prospect of being evaluated based on student scores. With the 2015 passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), each state is in the process of determining how it will use standards-aligned tests to judge school performance and hold schools accountable. Whatever accountability systems states design, they must continue to publicly report test results. And although most states use student test scores as a factor in teacher evaluations, these policies are also in flux.

Teachers in Wisconsin are not currently evaluated based on their students' test scores, but one teacher in that state spoke of the pressure of knowing that their schools are being given a letter grade based on test scores. Some expressed frustration with making strides in improving student learning but not closing the achievement gap enough to raise their school's letter grade. They acknowledged that low-performing students had to improve more than higher-performing students for the gaps to narrow. Schools that received grades of Fs for more than one year could be closed.

A Wisconsin teacher expressed concern that if scores are lower on the more rigorous new assessments, it will look like "you're failing even worse now." In addition, a principal's career may depend on the school's test scores, said another Wisconsin teacher. "And so we're in this giant guessing game [about] what we think might be on the tests," she added.

Wisconsin teachers talked about how the school's grade was put in the newspaper and how charter schools are starting to pop up in their communities so they feel pressure to improve. One teacher noted how the student populations in regular public schools are different from those in charter schools, so comparing student performance is like comparing apples and oranges.

Delaware teachers explained that not only are their state exams used for school accountability, but they also count for half of the teachers' evaluation score. Some focus group participants criticized the use of this exam to evaluate teachers. One teacher questioned whether the state exam "was designed for what they're using it for, and that's frustrating for me." Another teacher expressed this view:

> *[The DeSSA is] fine, keep it, we're all for that information. But it just should not be the end-all, be-all. It should not be — the teachers should not be held accountable … It's measuring a teacher's accountability rather than the students' approach.*

A Delaware teacher pointed to the apparent contradiction of using state exams for teacher evaluation when there are no similar consequences for students:

> *Nothing happens to the kids [who don't pass] right now. Because honestly, it used to be, if you didn't pass your state test, you didn't go onto the next grade. Well, notice they're not going to do that because people don't pass the state test right now … The percentages are low, they can't. So it shouldn't be used to measure us.*

The emphasis given to test scores has also created some unplanned tension between teachers despite their desire to remain collegial, said an Illinois focus group participant. Amid the pressure to do well on accountability measures, teachers often blame their colleagues in the lower grades for not adequately preparing students, and teachers in the lower grades blame the parents. "We're constantly playing this blame game, even though you don't really mean to or want to, but it's because you're being held accountable for where [the students] are," said one teacher.

The prospect of being evaluated based on student scores brings additional stress for teachers, particularly when state policies are in flux. "Am I going to get graded down? Am I going to get docked in pay?" said a Wisconsin teacher. An Illinois teacher said it gets "very, very frustrating" when students are not achieving as well as they should and teachers fear this will affect their evaluation.

Policy Recommendations and Closing Thoughts

This series of focus groups was designed to give teachers an opportunity to share their views about new standards and aligned assessments and to add nuance to the data gathered in CEP's nationally representative teacher survey and forthcoming survey of school district leaders. Although the focus groups reflect the opinions of only elementary school teachers, their views do align closely with the K-12 teachers' responses in CEP's national teacher survey.

Based on the feedback from the focus groups and results of the 2015 teacher survey, CEP has developed the following actionable recommendations to better support teachers and inform policy and practice in the Common Core era.

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

When CEP surveyed a nationally representative sample of teachers in 2015, most said that their opinions were often not considered in decision-making at the district, state, or national levels. At most, only about half the respondents said their opinions were considered in school-level decision-making.

Focus group teachers reiterated this concern. Teachers in one district emphasized the lack of support and communication between teachers and administrators by calling it "our biggest weakness" and "a big problem." One teacher added he felt "almost ignored" by those above the classroom level.

Policy Recommendations

- **School and district leaders and policymakers at the state and national levels need to develop a formal process for involving teachers in policy decisions.** Policymakers must recognize teachers as frontline leaders who are ideally situated to support a continuous improvement mindset.
- **District or school-based research partnerships are an excellent way to meaningfully involve teachers in efforts to improve classroom teaching and learning.** Teachers can work closely with researchers, providing them with real-time information and feedback about reforms and how they are impacting students.

2) Engage in outreach around the standards.

Focus group participants expressed generally positive views of the Common Core State Standards. Teachers said they liked how the Common Core standards provide uniformity across states, greater focus for curriculum, rigor for all students, an emphasis on higher-order skills, and a clear grade-to-grade progression. Unfortunately, 80% of teachers in states where the standards and assessments are in flux said this uncertainty challenged their efforts at least somewhat to teach the standards, according to the CEP survey. States and districts have already invested a substantial amount of time and resources on the standards and assessments; changing course at this point in the process would likely be highly disruptive for both teachers and students.

Policy Recommendations

- **State and local leaders should engage with stakeholders around the standards.** When the Common Core standards were first adopted, most states and districts conducted outreach and information sessions around the standards for parents, community members, policymakers, and others.[4] Now that the CCSS have been in place for a several years and aligned assessments have been administered, state and local leaders need to revisit their

4 Center on Education Policy, *Year Two of Implementing the Common Core State Standards: States' Progress and Challenges*, (CEP, 2011) and *Common Core State Standards in 2014: Districts' Perceptions, Progress, and Challenges* (CEP, 2014).

efforts to explain the rationale behind the standards and why the standards are beneficial for students. State and local leaders should also take this opportunity to hear from stakeholders about their concerns and answer questions. This may help to alleviate some concerns and misinformation about the Common Core.

- **State and local leaders should pay attention to teachers' views about the standards since teachers are the frontline implementers.** While many focus group teachers were generally supportive of the Common Core, some expressed concerns about, for example, the grade-level appropriateness of the standards. In our focus groups, teachers of grades K-2 said the focus on preparing students for the academic demands of the standards has reduced time for important social and emotional development activities. Other early elementary teachers said the standards did not account for differences in students' readiness for formal schooling.

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

Teachers surveyed in 2015 and the teachers we talked to in focus groups said they have had significant responsibility for creating their own CCSS-aligned curricular materials. For example, some focus group teachers reported that their district purchased textbooks aligned to older standards shortly before their state adopted the Common Core and could not afford to buy new textbooks so soon.

Many focus group teachers reported that roughly six years after the adoption of the CCSS, they were still working with textbooks aligned to previous state standards. As a result, they were responsible for adapting lesson plans to suit the new standards. Teachers were creating lessons by using a mix of old textbooks and new or adapted curricular resources that were better aligned to new standards.

Policy Recommendations

- **States and districts should purchase CCSS-aligned textbooks that have been properly vetted to ensure quality and alignment.** To fill gaps in curriculum or supplement textbooks that are not well-aligned with the CCSS, teachers have created or adapted much of their own curricula. Providing teachers with vetted, CCSS-aligned textbooks would save teachers time in aligning curricular and instructional practices with the new standards and would ensure continuity among classrooms and schools without stifling teacher autonomy.

- **States, education researchers, national organizations, and other groups with expertise need to identify and disseminate well-aligned curricular resources.** Teachers have already turned to online sources for curricular ideas, but this process can be time-consuming and the resources they find may not be aligned to the CCSS. National and state leaders, foundations and the research community should continue their efforts to identify and disseminate information about high quality, well-aligned curricular resources that can be easily accessed by teachers.

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

Focus group participants expressed some frustration about a lack of instructional resources that would help them shape lesson plans. Teachers indicated that actually seeing examples of what excellent teaching of the standards looks like would help them improve their own classroom practice.

Policy Recommendations

- **State and district leaders and national organizations could help teachers by identifying and disseminating online videos of teachers implementing Common Core-aligned instruction.** State and district leaders and national organizations may have already created or are currently maintaining video libraries. However, teachers in focus groups did not mention that they used these resources, even though they expressed a need for them. Wider dissemination of such videos through states, professional organizations that serve teachers, teacher unions, and other organizations should be a part of a comprehensive effort to provide teachers with exemplary teaching approaches around the Common Core.
- **District and school leaders need to provide in-district examples of teachers implementing Common Core-aligned instruction and opportunities to share instructional techniques.** District curriculum leaders can work with school leaders to identify exemplary teachers implementing the CCSS and provide opportunities for other district teachers to observe high-quality instruction. Schools leaders may also want to establish small groups of teachers, including one exemplary teacher, to work on creating and teaching one or two lessons at a time. In such lesson studies, teachers plan, observe, and reflect on a single lesson as a group.

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

The amendments to federal education law made by ESSA ushered in a new era of accountability requirements. Teachers and state and local leaders will need time to adapt to new, more flexible requirements. Despite the attention paid to the national debate on testing, it is important to note that most focus group teachers and those surveyed in 2015 did not want to do away with state assessments. They did, however, want opportunities to make testing requirements more effective and appropriate for their students.

For example, some focus group teachers said that the tests were too long for younger students. Teachers in the earliest tested grades felt the time and discipline required by the assessments was inappropriate for younger students and had negative consequences for some students. Other teachers noted that some test scores might not accurately demonstrate what students know because some students do not have adequate computer skills. They felt there was the potential for bias against students that had significantly less hands-on computer time than other students.

Policy Recommendations

- **States and testing consortia could consider shortening the length of the assessments.** Some assessment designers have already worked to shorten test length, so that some assessments given in 2016 were shorter than the original versions. However, teachers in all districts stressed that the length of the test was challenging, especially for younger students.

- **State and district leaders should plan for students that have weaker computer and keyboarding skills.** Focus group participants at all grade levels expressed concern about the potential consequences on state assessments for students with limited computer and keyboarding skills. Specifically, teachers suggested that variations in computer and keyboarding skills put some students at a disadvantage when taking computer-based tests. Computer-based assessments are only going to become more prevalent, and school districts need to start or continue their work to level the playing field in this area of inequity.

- **States could take advantage of the opportunity under ESSA to administer interim assessments that result in a single summative score.** Under ESSA, states can administer a single summative assessment or multiple interim assessments to measure student mastery of content in mathematics, ELA, and science. If states choose to use interim assessments, they must be administered statewide and combined to provide "a single summative score that provides valid, reliable, and transparent information on student achievement or growth."[5] Using interim assessments instead of a single summative assessment may break up the amount of testing time for students without reducing the total number of testing minutes. Moreover, shorter interim assessments may be graded more quickly and provide teachers with immediate feedback about their students' performance. This second point directly addresses teachers' frustration that end-of-year summative assessments do not provide actionable feedback for improving their curriculum and instruction.

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

Focus group teachers wanted student achievement data reports to include areas of students' specific strengths and weaknesses, but they often only saw a final score. Teachers also lamented that student data was often sent to them far too late to actually be useful in the classroom.

While some teachers mentioned the use of secure online portals to provide teachers with more comprehensive assessment data, most found the portals difficult to navigate. Focus group teachers noted that they needed training to understand how to use these portals effectively. For example, two teachers in one state had been given state-led professional development on the function and uses of the portal, and while the student information they wanted was there, it would have been difficult to find without the training. Teachers who were not trained to use state assessment portals talked about spending large amounts of time looking for information or trying to combine data points for different students so they could see the results from a whole class — and many of those teachers gave up before obtaining the data they wanted.

Policy Recommendations

- **States should consider sharing with teachers the state math and ELA test data they already give to parents.** Focus group participants in multiple states said that the data provided to parents about their children's performance on state math and ELA tests is more detailed and useful than the data teachers receive. Giving teachers the same performance data that states provide to parents could be a simple, low-cost approach.

5 Every Student Succeeds Act, section 1111(b)(2)(B)(viii)(I-II).

- **States and districts should provide teachers with relevant professional development opportunities so they can better use assessment results to improve their instruction.** Many states are now providing teachers with student assessment data through secure online portals. However, most focus group teachers were unfamiliar with the portals and struggled to use them efficiently. Therefore, a first step in helping teachers effectively use assessment data is for states and districts to provide teachers with opportunities to learn how to navigate the portals and become comfortable in accessing the data they want. In addition, teachers need support from states and districts, through professional development or other means, to help them interpret new assessment data and use it to make informed curricular and instructional decisions.

Closing Thoughts

Implementing rigorous new education standards and assessments during a period of significant political, demographic, and technological change was never going to be an easy endeavor. Change, even in its simplest form, can be disruptive and confusing.

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 "details" of implementation — most notably, textbooks, curricular resources, and teacher training — are still a work in progress in many communities. Politics and parental concerns also remain issues to be dealt with.

Schools and districts are just beginning to use the new CCSS-aligned assessments. As with the standards, the details associated with using the assessments (such as training, access, and technology) will impact how effectively they help teachers improve and target instruction. A process of continuous improvement is an important part of making the assessments a more useful and effective tool 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. Focus groups, when carefully planned and well executed, can provide education leaders and policymakers with the kind of valuable information that comes from reflection. In the best cases, they will use that information to inform and strengthen their efforts to improve teaching and learning. We hope that is the case with the information presented in this report.

For CEP, spending time with teachers and learning firsthand about the potential benefits and challenges that go along with teaching the new standards and administering the aligned assessments added invaluable detail and nuance to our research on those topics. We are grateful for the time they spent with us.

Credits and Acknowledgments

This report was written by Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's deputy director; Nancy Kober, CEP's editorial consultant; Matthew Frizzell, CEP's senior research associate; and Maria Ferguson, CEP's executive director. Rentner, Frizzell, Ferguson, and Brandon Aigner, CEP's graduate assistant, co-conducted the focus groups; each focus group was conducted by two different staff from this group of four. Rentner and Kober analyzed the focus group transcripts. Catie DiElsi, CEP's intern, did supporting research. Matthew Braun, CEP's research assistant, assisted with the survey data tabulation.

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