

THE CURRICULUM GAP

New Common Core State Standards hold a promise for more students across the country to graduate high school fully prepared for college or the workplace. But implementing those standards isn't easy, in part because current curriculum isn't up to the task. Grantmakers can help.

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It is an unprecedented moment in American education. In 2015, more than 40 states are planning to fully implement new Common Core State Standards, a wholesale reinvigoration of academics intended to close the gap between age-old public school expectations and the demands of the modern-day college and workplace.

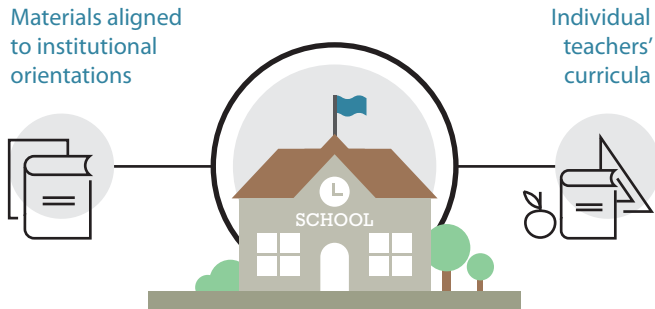
School districts are facing numerous challenges in implementation, from bringing teachers up to speed on what the new standards require to reassuring anxious families that students will be prepared to meet them. And **in 2015**,¹ millions of students will sit for new Common Core-aligned exams, an event that appears poised to serve as an unofficial referendum on implementation efforts thus far.

There's a practical problem at the heart of this work: a lack of high-quality curriculum aligned to the standards. The Common Core standards emphasize critical thinking, creativity and analysis over rote memorization, and require that students master far more sophisticated content in English Language Arts and math.

And so hundreds of districts in dozens of states need new, high-quality materials – or tools to align existing materials – based on standards that emphasize higher-order skills like never before. Grantmakers can use their **unique positions and abilities**² to help meet the need.

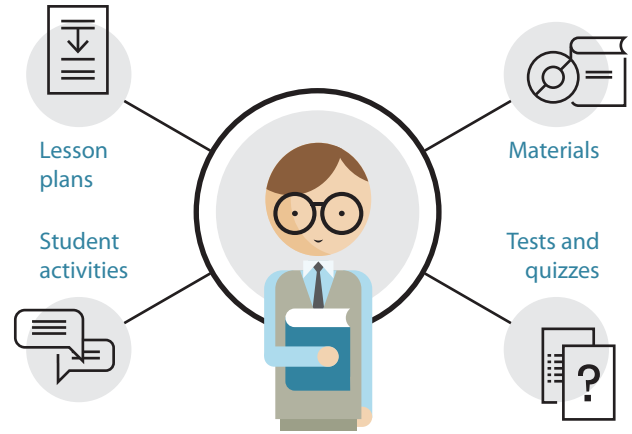
WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

If academic standards set the destination for student learning, curriculum is everything they need to get there.



SCHOOL OR DISTRICT CURRICULUM

A school or district's curriculum is the sum total of everything they do and use to teach. That includes materials and activities aligned to institutional orientations, such as hands-on projects in the classroom or community, textbooks, books, worksheets and supplies. It also includes schedules of required classes and non-academic activities that are part of the school experience, such as community service or capstone graduation projects.

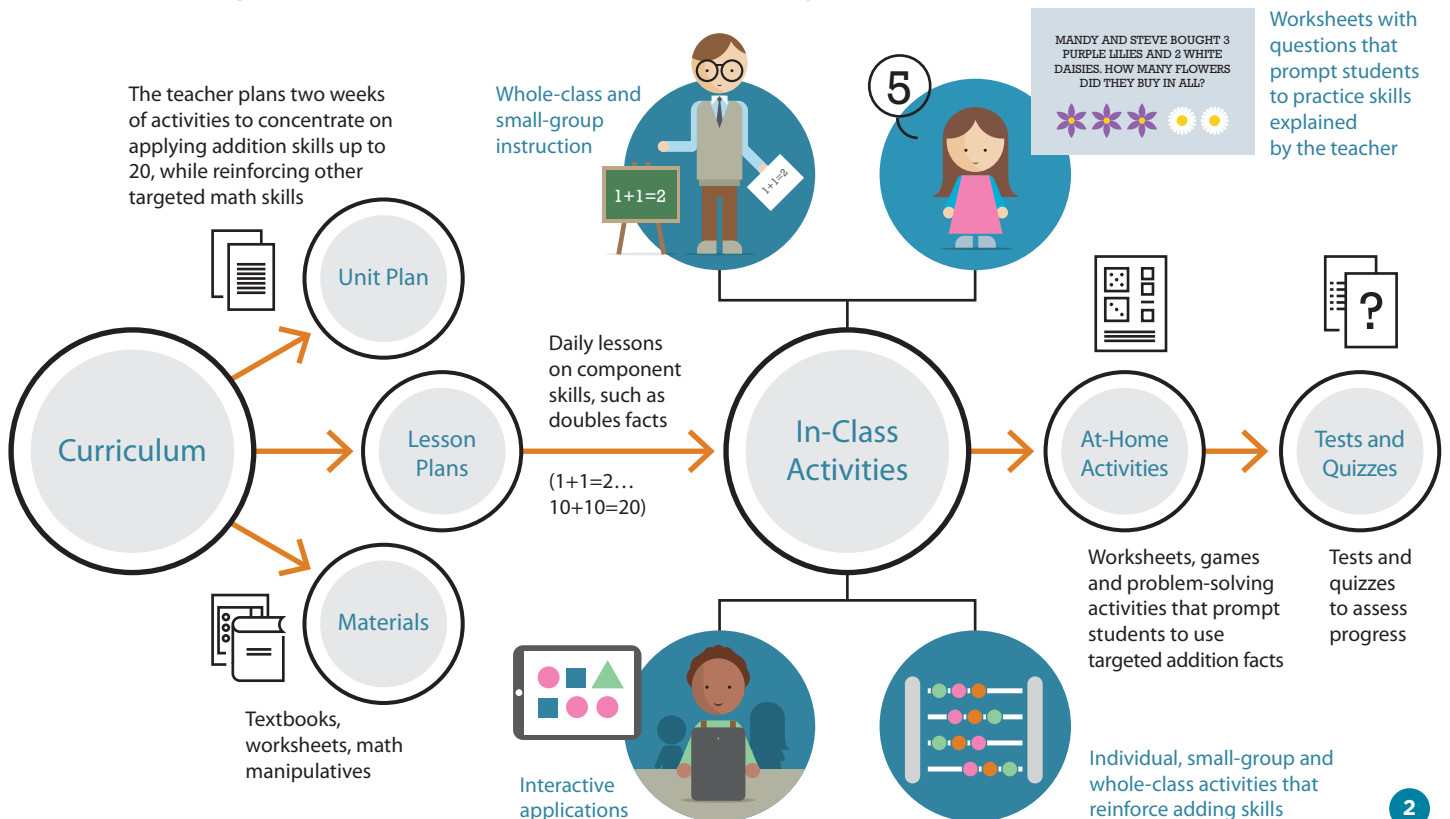


INDIVIDUAL TEACHER'S CURRICULUM

An individual teacher's curriculum is all of the plans, activities and materials used to teach a particular unit or class. That includes lesson plans, students exercises and projects, materials like books, videos and art supplies and tests and quizzes.

EXAMPLE: LEARNING ADDITION FACTS TO 20

Standard: First-grade students will master addition facts up to 20.



A “COMMON” CHALLENGE

“There’s been no time in American history where this number of school districts wanted to swap out all their reading and math materials at all grades for new things.”

- Jay Diskey,
Executive Director of the
Association of American
Publishers³

Recent research is clear: “the curriculum itself – what is taught – makes a huge difference”⁴ in student achievement. It’s not enough to just tell teachers, “have students engage with rich non-fiction passages and provide textual evidence of understanding.” To effectively lead lessons that reach these rigorous goals, teachers and administrators need common, proven tools and a shared understanding of what high-quality lessons look like.

Districts have been grappling with the challenge of updating curriculum in line with Common Core standards, in part because appropriate textbooks, the typical source of curriculum solutions, have not been available.

While many textbooks and other products carry labels claiming Common Core alignment, a comprehensive review and anecdotal evidence found **the opposite is true**.⁵ Some advocates note that many of the labels were affixed to existing products with few updates shortly after the standards were adopted, in a rush to address **unprecedented market need**.⁶ In addition, even if traditional textbooks were on-point for current challenges, many districts simply can’t afford to purchase all new materials, all at once.

These challenges have touched off several **waves of innovation** in developing and sharing materials.⁷ Helped by federal grant dollars and a robust culture of web-based resource sharing, districts and states have taken matters into their own hands.

For example:

- The **Tri-State Collaborative**, a venture involving education officials in New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, with help from Achieve. The collaborative created the free EQulP rubric for districts wishing to evaluate existing curriculum for **Common Core alignment**.⁸ **The rubric has been downloaded more than 15,000 times**.⁹
- Through **Engage NY**, the New York State Department of Education has created and provided free, Common Core-aligned curriculum that is being used across the country, including in **Washington State**¹⁰ and **California**.¹¹

In addition, other non-traditional sources of curriculum like **teacher-driven open-source platforms**¹² and **nonprofits**¹³ have created some new materials and standards to rate existing materials. But such efforts are **nascent**.¹⁴ It is unclear to what degree they will sustain momentum if textbook publishers bring properly aligned materials to market and federal and state support for innovation recedes.

New Standards, New Lessons

New standards call for new texts and activities to meet them. Consider **this example** of a typical English Language Arts lesson for 2nd and 3rd graders reading about Apollo 11, pre- and post-Common Core standards.¹⁵

Old Text:

A huge white rocket towers against the blue sky. It is thirty-six stories high. It weighs over six million pounds. It is called the Saturn V. It is the biggest, most powerful rocket ever built.

Today it is going to make the dream of centuries come true. It will send three men where no human being has ever been before. To the moon!

Old Question:

What was the spacecraft called?

New Text:

High above there is the Moon, cold and quiet, no air, no life, but glowing in the sky.

Here below there are three men who close themselves in special clothes, who – click – lock hands in heavy gloves, who – click – lock heads in large round helmets.

It is summer here in Florida, hot, and near the sea. But now these men are dressed for colder, stranger places. They walk with stiff and awkward steps in suits not made for Earth.

New Question:

What is the author trying to convey when he says, “these men are dressed for colder, stranger places. They walk with stiff and awkward steps...”? Use information from the text to explain your answer.



Source: The Foundation for Excellence in Education

“...A nascent marketplace for instructional materials that rewards quality and alignment to the standards is finally emerging, thanks to the work of states and districts that are investing in developing and evaluating materials publicly.”

– Rachel Leifer, The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, and Denis Udall, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation ¹⁶

Teacher Sentiment Tracks Perceived Support

Surveys of teacher opinions and experience regarding Common Core indicate an urgent need for practical tools. Teachers and principals are the face of the new standards, so effective implementation relies in great part on their enthusiasm and ability.

Teachers generally express enthusiasm for Common Core State Standards, but consistently report that a lack of high-quality curricula is **the major barrier**¹⁷ to teaching to them. Anecdotal evidence and studies find teachers and administrators **lack a common language**¹⁸ to drive Common Core-aligned instruction and professional development.

Not surprisingly, teacher sentiment – critical to effective implementation – varies dramatically based on the level of support they perceive from their district and state. Less than half of all teachers in Common Core states say they are receiving sufficient support; those who say they feel supported are far more likely to say they are **hopeful and enthusiastic about the standards**.¹⁹ Teachers in states that have fully implemented the standards are far more likely to say they are receiving sufficient support.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT

It is a unique moment in American education, for teachers, students, districts and grantmakers. There are several strategies available to funders wishing to support high-quality curriculum.

► **Local and Limited:** Funding for Materials

Grantmakers can offer financial support to purchase new curriculum that is aligned to the Common Core or assess existing materials for alignment. This could include:

- Grants to license new materials, including supplementary materials for existing textbooks as an interim step before purchasing next texts.
- Grants to provide training for administrators and educators to assess existing materials or potential purchases for quality and alignment to new standards.

Funders can contribute and lend balance to an ongoing discussion of what new, high-quality curriculum looks like.

► **Local and Medium Term: Fund or Lend Capacity**

Grantmakers can offer hands-on support to build local expertise on high-quality curriculum. This could include:

- Co-locate or fund a medium-term position in a state or district office to serve as a leader in Common Core-aligned curriculum. This role could oversee efforts to adapt or evaluate off-the-shelf materials for alignment, and serve as a quality control lead for staff professional development programs.

► **Regional and Medium Term: Foster Collaboration**

Grantmakers can create opportunities for experts and practitioners in the field to share materials and expertise. This could include:

- Create opportunities to convene members of various districts' or states' Common Core leadership teams to share their thinking. Such gatherings could be in person or virtual.
- Funding and technological support to encourage states and districts to share resources.
 - For example, some states have created searchable databases of sample K-12 lessons, such as [Colorado, Georgia and Maryland](#).²⁰ Grantmakers could support websites, wikis and other interactive platforms for such resources.

► **National and Ongoing: Join the Conversation**

While the Common Core has become a politically complicated issue, the need for students to graduate high school prepared for college or the workforce is not. To buttress the strategies suggested above, grantmakers can also support research and communications efforts regarding the need for high-quality curriculum.

Grantmakers can support the introduction of rigorous, high-quality curriculum in the classroom by lending support to efforts to **explicate the challenges** graduates may face when not sufficiently challenged in school.²¹ And, they can contribute to and lend balance to an ongoing discussion of what new, high-quality curriculum looks like, through media outreach, **supporting efforts to engage directly with the public**,²² and by establishing relationships with advocates, educators and local and state officials.

The curriculum challenge districts face is significant, but it is also shared. Grantmakers can support individual transitions and widespread collaboration to address current problems – while also building long-term capacity for our schools to deliver rigorous, meaningful lessons that prepare students for success not just during their school years, but well into adulthood.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/09/03/03assessment.h34.html>
- ² http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/disrupting_the_textbook_status_quo
- ³ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/06/03/318228023/the-common-core-curriculum-void>
- ⁴ <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov09/vol67/num03/The-Myth-of-Equal-Content.aspx>
- ⁵ <http://news.wypr.org/post/textbooks-out-synch-common-core>
- ⁶ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/06/03/318228023/the-common-core-curriculum-void>
- ⁷ <http://edexcellence.net/publications/common-core-in-the-districts>
- ⁸ <https://www.engageny.org/resource/tri-state-quality-review-rubric-and-rating-process>
- ⁹ <http://achievethecore.org/page/605/equip-quality-review-rubric-list-pg>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2013/dec/04/spokane-public-schools-looks-to-adopt-new-math/>
- ¹¹ <http://www.modbee.com/news/local/education/article3174164.html>
- ¹² <http://www.sharemylesson.com/common-core-state-standards?storyCode=50000148>
- ¹³ <http://www.achievethecore.org>
- ¹⁴ <http://www.edreports.org>
- ¹⁵ The full comparison is available at <http://excelined.org/common-core-toolkit/old-standards-v-common-core-a-side-by-side-comparison-of-english-language-arts-2/>
- ¹⁶ http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/disrupting_the_textbook_status_quo
- ¹⁷ <http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources/teachers-on-the-common-core-2013.htm>
- ¹⁸ <http://edexcellence.net/publications/common-core-in-the-districts>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/179048/teachers-feel-worried-frustrated-common-core.aspx>
- ²⁰ http://publications.sreb.org/2014/CCSS_Summary_SREB.pdf
- ²¹ For example, Mission Readiness, an organization of retired military leaders who advocate for investments in education, nutrition and other programs for children, has created state-focused research Common Core State Standards to national preparedness, including this report: <http://www.missionreadiness.org/2013/military-business-leaders-support-pennsylvania-common-core-standards-to-ensure-future-national-and-economic-security/>
- ²² <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/big-business-takes-on-tea-party-over-common-core-104662.html>

More Challenges, More Resources

A lack of high-quality curriculum aligned to Common Core standards is hampering districts' implementation efforts. Check out "Testing on Trial," a new [Grantmakers for Education](#) resource that suggests strategies for grantmakers to help meet the need.

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