

Notes on EdFunders Listening Session on Common Core State Standards November 12, 2014 at Ford Foundation

Speakers

- **Linda Darling-Hammond**, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education, [Stanford Graduate School of Education](#)
- **Chris Hernandez**, Science Teacher, [Robert F. Wagner Middle School](#), *panelist*
- **Patrick McGillicuddy**, Principal, [East Brooklyn Community High School \(EBCHS\)](#), *panelist*
- **Rosemery Milczewski**, Math Teacher, [Flushing International High School](#), *panelist*
- **Allison Newman**, Director, SCO Family of Services at [East Brooklyn Community High School](#), *panelist*
- **Pedro Noguera**, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education, [New York University](#)
- **James Short**, Director, Gottesman Center for Science Teaching and Learning, [American Museum of Natural History](#), *panelist*
- **Claire Sylvan**, President, [International Network for Public Schools](#), *panelist*

Moderator:

Robert Hughes, President of New Visions for Public Schools

Setting the Context

Hughes opened the session by noting that the Common Core State Standards have profound ramifications for schools, teachers, communities and students. Do we have what we need in terms of strategies, expertise and resources to pull up all schools, including those that have struggled, and all students, including those who have struggled in traditional schools?

Darling-Hammond laid out four key questions to inform an answer:

- What is the Common Core?
- What opportunities and challenges does it pose?
- What are the controversies and why have they arisen?
- How can we maximize the benefits and minimize the risks?

What is the Common Core?

In crux, Darling-Hammond said, the Common Core aims **fewer, higher and deeper**.

In other words, the Common Core Standards are intended to enable teachers to go deep into concepts, thus building a more stable foundation for children to learn. She noted that they were designed partly in response to changes in the global economy. Over the past decades, labor market demand for skills like complex communication and expert thinking have increased while demand for “routine” skills – the cognitive or manual skills that are easiest both to teach

and to test – has decreased; they also are easiest to digitize, automate, and outsource. For schools to prepare their students for success in this new world, schools must teach them to:

- Think critically and solve problems;
- Communicate effectively;
- Work collaboratively.

And, she added, given that economists predict that a majority of jobs today's children will encounter have not yet been invented, schools must prepare students to **learn how to learn**.

Teaching these skills, Darling-Hammond said, requires a different kind of pedagogy, one that many teachers will themselves need help to learn. The Common Core Standards move beyond memorization to understanding and applying concepts in a variety of ways; they are interdisciplinary and can be applied in science, technology and social studies. They require students to “understand,” “derive,” “assess,” “interpret,” find and use evidence to make persuasive and analytic arguments. These capacities are imperative in life, she observed: if students do not know how to find things for themselves and make sense of them, they will be lost in this world.

What opportunities and challenges does it pose?

Darling-Hammond identified several potential opportunities offered by Common Core:

- Legitimizing the pursuit of 21st century higher order thinking skills;
- Development of more thoughtful curriculum resources (with the corresponding challenge of identifying which are good);
- More opportunities for teachers to collaborate around curriculum.

At the same time, she identified major challenges, including:

- Pedagogies appropriate to the standards
- Assessments appropriate to the standards – able to measure “deeper learning” and extending beyond tests to attend to social-emotional and other capacities integral to the Common Core
- Alignment of the new standards with accountability metrics: a clear challenge has been concern about punitive elements in accountability taking predominance
- Time to understand, adapt and implement the standards effectively, including taking into account local context and the diversity of student starting points.

What are the controversies and why have they arisen?

Darling-Hammond discussed several of the controversies that have arisen:

- *Who developed the Common Core?* She noted that the standards were developed relatively quickly. Given the trade-off between speed and engagement, some have

raised questions about whether teachers, other educators and communities were adequately engaged. .

- *Are they appropriate for all kids and contexts?* She noted concerns have been raised especially about the developmental appropriateness of early-grade standards and, given the unevenness trajectories of children's development, their impact on children's reading skills.
- *How are the standards being implemented?* She noted the many questions about whether we're taking enough time, providing enough professional development, doing the implementation in the right way.
- *Is the goal to improve teaching or blame teachers?* She acknowledged that the link between teacher evaluation systems using test scores and the advent of the Common Core State Standards coupled with the uncertainty about the standards has been a huge challenge and huge controversy.
- *How will the tests be used?* There had already, she noted, been controversy about value-added metrics *generally* in teacher evaluation. Adding the uncertainty engendered by new tests and new standards to that has been probably the single biggest controversy.

She remarked that, when the discussion becomes about testing, it no longer focuses on the standards, which extend far beyond what the tests can measure. If we really want to focus on the standards, we have to focus on that whole agenda, keeping the tests in a modest and informative, not a giant and punitive, place.

How can we maximize the benefits and minimize the risks?

Darling-Hammond proposed several strategies by which educators and policymakers could effectively implement the Common Core:

- Keep students at the center: adapt teaching to their needs and skill levels
- Organize professional learning and development around the standards and engage teachers in curriculum development and implementation.
- Develop and share formative curriculum units, such as those designed by UC-Berkeley in math and UCLA in English Language Arts.
- Develop new framework for assessments so that they are models of good instruction and sources of good diagnostic information.
- Redefine accountability to focus on capacity-building within a multiple-measures context.

Common Core will be successful, she concluded, to the extent that we shift from test and punish to support and improve. As had speakers at Edfunders initial listening session [link to notes], she proposed a new model of accountability, containing elements also raised at that session:

- Meaningful learning that helps students in their lives and careers
- Professional capacity-building to help educators do their work

- Resource accountability, so that resources are spent to make sure that the work gets done.

Opening discussion (panelists and guests)

What are your strategies for advancing the Common Core approach?

Speakers highlighted the following strategies:

- Pedagogy that focuses on what kids need to know and be able to do after high school: instruction that is student-centered, inquiry-based – students learning through projects and collaboration – and focused on deeper learning.
- Interdisciplinary teams to enrich the pedagogy of content teachers – e.g., science teachers working with literacy experts to scaffold literacy instruction in teaching students how to pose questions, find evidence and use that evidence to construct scientific explanations; every teacher attending to language development.
- Using time creatively and purposefully to plan collaboratively, including thinking through together how to meet the wide array student needs – social and emotional as well as academic and language development ones. One speaker held up the model of the Japanese lesson study as a structured and intentional way to improve teaching practices.
- Explicit attention to social and emotional development, which all identified as integral to deeper learning – E.g., Providing students with choices that enable them to relate their learning to their lives; weekly meetings between teachers and guidance counselors/social workers. EBCHS commented that this is central to its school model: it partners with SCO, whose counseling staff works closely with teachers and the school administration, including around programming.

Were you prepared for Common Core, and what helps you implement it today?

The teachers on the panel agreed that their pre-service training had not prepared them well for the Common Core. They and other speakers, both on the panel and from the floor, identified strategies that are helping them implement it:

- **Structures that enable teacher collaboration**, within the school community and also among different schools and through networks
- **High-quality, focused and long-term professional development**. One strategy that several highlighted was role-playing, in which teachers take on the role of students, doing what they are asking their students to do. One speaker highlighted the value of coaching – having the PD instructor observe and comment on how the teacher is implementing the principles.
- Nurturing of a **learning community** among the adults in the school.

How are you handling assessment in your school, and are the assessments driving changes that lead to deeper learning?

There was agreement that the State tests are not currently driving changes that lead to deeper learning. One speaker commented that the Regents exams in global and US history are based on breadth of content, which is at odds with the fewer, deeper, higher goals of the Common Core. Another cited the Regents' exam focus on five-paragraph essays, which do not embody the extended writing and research called for by the Common Core.

Several speakers held up performance or portfolio assessments as possible vehicles to drive deeper learning. They also might address the challenge that exams oriented solely to college readiness pose for students who do not intend to enter college directly on graduation from high school.

How do we need to think about engaging the community in Common Core?

Speakers highlighted the need for frequent and ongoing communication with students and families about the Common Core, including what it means for them. As one speaker put it, parents need to know more than that the curriculum has changed. Another noted that parents have always said they want deep learning, active, hands-on engagement, culturally relevant learning. The Common Core is a way to achieve those goals, but parents and communities need more if they are going to press for that and to partner with the schools in achieving them. One speaker suggested working closely with community organizations that serve the students and their families.

What is one thing you would change, emphasize or support as we move towards Common Core?

- **Time** and trust: time to plan what we need to do to change our curriculum to align with common core standards, and trust in what we're doing. Exams and standards should not be judgmental, but a way of pushing our kids forward.
- Recognize that the Common Core Standards can be taught through **science and social studies. These subjects can be ways to get at the deep learning** the Common Core values.
- Scale up the effective **professional development** models.
- Emphasize **social and emotional support of learning** and take a realistic view of what will help students lead successful and happy lives.
- **Professional development** for principals and teachers to help them recognize and spread effective teaching practices.
- Expand **collaboration** within schools and across schools that want to learn from each other. The system needs to structure opportunities for like-minded schools to work together to effectively implement the Common Core.

End of Opening Session

Closing Summary:

Dr. Noguera summed up themes of the day. He identified two serious gaps:

- A gap between policy and practice
- A gap between kids and schools

All the speakers at the event had made clear that schools and principals need assistance to implement the Common Core effectively. Professor Noguera expressed concern about whether current policies are providing that assistance. As Darling-Hammond had suggested, policymakers must rethink the use of assessments so they can be used to diagnose and support, rather than to threaten or punish..

The gap between what teachers know how to do and what students need is too great at present. We expect children to adjust to the way we teach. We should shift the focus to creating schools that are ready for their students. He noted that the school leaders at this event are thinking about how to get ready for these kinds of students – who do not speak English, who are already discouraged, who have learning disabilities. Schools must be organized and staff must be trained to meet their needs. Without that, the Common Core will bring no change.

Dr. Noguera underlined some of the essential practices the panel had identified:

- Every teacher in a school serving large numbers of ELLs has to be trained to teach them, instead of assuming an ESL teacher can do it.
- Professional development has to look a lot like what we expect kids to do.

He remarked that he was encouraged by the thoughtfulness he'd heard of teachers and principals who are approaching the Common Core as an opportunity to make deeper, meaningful learning available to a greater number of students. But, he concluded, there's a lot of work to be done to make that happen.

Mr. Hughes closed the event by noting that the session had raised essential questions:

- How do we build the capacity of leaders to be more effective doing some of the most complicated work in education?
- How do we build professional capacity throughout the system – investing more effectively in the people on the front lines?
- How do we incorporate youth development principles in the work we do in the classroom, helping students develop “soft” as well as academic skills?
- How do we engage parents and communities in this work – relating academic and social interventions and family and community support in the classroom, the extended day and in the lives of the young people as they move through the school system.

The Common Core, he said, while not perfect and frequently overcome by the controversies Darling-Hammond had described, is starting to create real conversations in schools.

Attachment One

Notes on the PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitated by Tynesha McHarris ([Brooklyn Community Foundation](#))
and Joe Luft ([Internationals Network for Public Schools](#))

Which practices should be changed or added to fill a gap, or replicated?

There was a consensus that there are good programs out there and that Urban Advantage was one. In discussing what Urban Advantage offers, the group identified key criteria of successful professional development (PD) that should be replicated: Successful PD is

- Sustained and long-term (not “drive by”)
- Inquiry-based
- Directly relevant to what the teacher is teaching

There was also agreement that PD for the Common Core required more. Among the ideas raised were

- The value of making PDs multi- or interdisciplinary – e.g., science teachers working with ELA teachers and literacy experts so that the science (or other discipline) teachers can incorporate literacy techniques in their instruction and the ELA teachers understand the conventions of writing across disciplines
- The need for training in leading discussions that incorporate student voice – and argumentation. The Common Core standards value the capacity for reasoned debate, but few teachers are trained to lead it.

A key gap identified was information – including a quality rating – about and co-ordination of the different providers of PD. As one person put it, “Principals sometimes are not able to be critical consumers.” Another commented that, “Just because a person is an administrator doesn’t mean [s/he] doesn’t require deep support.” In addition to the need for “principal development” around PD, there also was wide agreement that “someone” should “work... with the providers to make sure the support they offer is aligned.”

There was also widespread agreement that good PD is expensive in terms of both money and time. Thus, one participant suggested, it is crucial to figure out how to institutionalize it – build systems and school cultures that teachers can learn from and adapt to.

Where might additional funding best be used?

- Supporting **replication** of the excellent programs
- Building an **infrastructure (at the mid-level?) to help principals and teachers identify appropriate providers of PD**
- **Developing and providing access to curricular resources** (e.g., textbooks, readings, classroom aids and materials)

What policy changes would help improve this work?

There was a consensus that the new standards were being put in place too quickly. Comments referred back to Darling-Hammond's presentation – and New York's own experience in adopting new standards – and called for **a longer implementation period** and for **rethinking incentives**, so that the standards, not the test scores, could again be the “focal point.”

Attachment Two

Notes on the FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitated by Megan Hester ([Annenberg Institute for School Reform](#)),
Ariella Louie ([Trinity Wall Street Grants](#)), Saskia Traill ([The After School Corporation](#))

Which practices should be changed or added to fill a gap, or replicated?

There was widespread agreement that the “marketing” of the Common Core had been “abysmal.” Several participants agreed they’d learned more about what – and why – the Common Core is at the day’s session than they had known before. A key gap, therefore, is **effective communication** with parents and community-based organizations (CBOs) about the Common Core, including

- Developing a common language to describe and understand it
- Putting the focus on the teaching and learning instead of testing
- Making explicit the social and emotional implications of the Common Core
- Recognizing that implementation is a long-term project – and involves a lot of catch-up for students arriving in high school who were not taught in ways aligned to the Common Core
- Highlighting the national aspects of the implementation – e.g., “This is bigger than NYC.”

Participants praised the efforts of some schools and CBO’s to begin that communication, highlighting the following strategies as worthy of replication:

- Sending home information sheets, including examples that relate to the homework or exercises that parents can do with their children
- Parent-teacher workshops that enable parents – and teachers – to experience the Common Core classroom and the kinds of tasks their children/students are being asked to do
- Translation of key resources into multiple languages
- Sharing (and explaining) samples of work – participants cited “Gallery Walks” of student work; assignments that have students write to their parents analyzing or explaining what they are doing in school as successful instances of this
- Focus on particular aspects of the Common Core – e.g., the skills students will learn in a given year or time period rather than the entire design of the Common Core
- Efforts to build partnerships between families, schools and CBO’s and to build communities of support around student learning

Several also noted that the Department of Education (DoE) had posted several useful resources, including “collapsed cheat sheets” on its own website and had provided useful one-page information sheets for parent-teacher conferences. But they expressed concern that so much of the material is only in English, when so many student families are not fluent English speakers or readers.

Where might additional funding best be used?

There was wide agreement that a crucial need is **training that goes a bit beyond professional development, in bringing together teachers, after-school staff and parents**. Through such trainings, all can learn together and understand that each has a role to play in this work.

Participants also cited **support for CBO’s and schools to implement what one called the “missing” social emotional piece**. Both schools and their CBO partners need additional training to do this.

Participants also suggested **funding for training for principals and school staff on best practices in parent engagement**.

What policy changes would help improve this work?

There was a consensus that individual schools and the DoE more broadly must work to build **trust**. As one participant put it, “No effective engagement can happen without building deeper, trusting relationships between schools and parents.” Another added, “Schools don’t know how to do it, and there’s no system in place at the DoE centrally to support schools to do it.” As part of this, the DoE might provide **additional training for principals**.

Participants also agreed that the system must **shift its focus from fear and punishment to learning goals**: an effective message might be that the Common Core represents the shift in learning for which many educators and families have long advocated.

Explicit acknowledgement that it is the responsibility of the school system to make sure that this work is being done effectively in every school and every community, not a patchwork in which some do well and others lack resources.

Attachment Three

Notes on the EQUITY AT THE STATE AND DISTRICT LEVEL BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitated by Fred Frelow ([Ford Foundation](#)) and Richard Stopol ([Outward Bound](#))

Which practices should be changed or added to fill a gap, or replicated?

Participants noted that a key goal of the Common Core – standardization – confronted a state and many district systems that are complex and marked by issues of equity, including equitable access to resources. Some wondered whether uniformity is an appropriate goal for the state.

The group identified several practices that should be changed as well as several that should be replicated and one – **providing more time both for teacher professional development and for programs that develop the social and emotional skills of students** – that should be added.

- Practices that should be changed
 - **Differentiation** among both schools and students should be encouraged
 - There should be **more opportunities for student development outside the Common Core**
 - **Common Core standards should be aligned with state exit exams** (Regents) and **CUNY** entrance and placement exams
 - There should be more **in-school tutoring** available for students – and less pressure on parents to assist with Common Core aligned work
- Practices that should be replicated
 - Leveraging some of the so-called challenges (E.g., students who are learning English as a non-native language could help each other as at the Internationals Network for Public Schools; more schools should aim to prepare students to earn the New York State Seal of Biliteracy)
 - Providing more support for those who will “age out” of the system without a diploma, possibly through replicating a certificate program such as California has

Where might additional funding best be used?

Participants agreed that **more funding** is necessary. Some advocated that schools should be allowed to determine where it would be spent. Others pressed for additional funding to be targeted at programs to help students who are struggling, including additional support for intervention services and multi-tiered support systems. Participants encouraged that DoE reallocate funding so that more is available for counseling and in-school tutoring. Additional funding, it was agreed, could also be targeted at meeting the social, emotional and artistic needs of students.

What policy changes would help improve this work?

Participants called for policy changes that would enable the practices they had identified as important, such as:

- **Differentiation and multi-tier systems of support** for students and schools
- **Development of a school assessment model** that is not one-size-fits-all
- More **transparency** about the logic, process, and results of testing

Participants also called for both state and city officials to take note of successful schools and **work to replicate the successful practices in schools across the district or state**. Some urged that the state reconsider whether exit exams are necessary and whether all teachers should be required to learn about the Common Core standards.

Attachment Four

Notes on EQUITY AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitators: Kavitha Mediratta ([The Atlantic Philanthropies](#)) and Jonathan Spear ([Generation Schools](#))

Which practices should be changed or added to fill a gap, or replicated?

There was agreement that professional development for teachers should be expanded. Participants thought there should be **increased focus in professional development on differentiation, personalization** and what Darling Hammond had called “**learning progressions.**” Understanding those better would help teachers recognize when and how students are behind (e.g., if the issue for an ELL students is language development in English or content knowledge) and make the appropriate intervention. It would also enable teachers to respond more directly to the needs of special education students and the diverse levels of background knowledge and content mastery they encounter in the classroom. Another practice that participants thought should be expanded was establishing, as some schools have, internal systems and norms that support individual teacher and nurture **collaboration**. Collaboration, it was noted, enables teachers both to support one another and to reflect on their own practices, both of which participants thought should be implemented more widely.

There was also agreement that a key missing piece is curriculum. There are few curricula developed and even fewer **curricular resources**, such as teachers guides and classroom materials. Participants noted **that both teachers and principals need help in selecting and implementing the right tools**. This, it was noted, could be especially important for technology. Principals and teachers need help in bringing in assisted technology for kids with disabilities and delivering the content in multiple formats to support the individual learners and their progress toward Common Core standards.

Several participants noted that the emphasis on testing as the measure of school and teacher success should be changed. As one commented, “Principals make choices based on the pressure from our assessments and that challenges the type of equity we can create at a school level.”

Where might additional funding best be used?

Participants called for additional funding to be used to support increased **collaboration**, within and across schools. They also called for additional funding of **professional development for both teachers**, who are being asked to work differently, and **principals**, who are being asked to be change agents in ways in which few have any training at all. Some also suggested **funding model systems**, including documenting impact and successful practices and then widely disseminating the knowledge.

Some participants pointed to value of using time during the summer as an opportunity for professional development, acknowledging this requires additional or reallocation of funding. There was also a suggestion that it might be interesting to include students as staff in professional development.

What policy changes would help improve this work?

Participants agreed that policy changes area vital but also that they should be proposed cautiously. There was widespread agreement that it is crucial to change **incentives**. Right now, several commented, the system offers disincentives to collaboration and that should be changed.

There was also agreement that **assessments** should be rethought in ways that align with Darling-Hammond’s suggestions: assessments should be diagnostic and supportive of good teaching. Some suggested that part of rethinking assessments is rethinking the kind of **data** that is useful and thus should be collected. As one person put it, “It’s not helpful just to keep measuring a bunch of things.” Participants expressed awareness that this is a complicated question, acknowledging that some data that might not be useful at the school level should be collected and used for system-wide accountability.

Participants also were agreed on the importance of developing policies that encourage authentic **engagement by schools, families and communities**. Some suggested that community engagement might be a useful gauge for funders in determining where to allocate their resources: schools that have genuinely “opted into” the work and are engaging families and communities in it. Engaged communities could be part of the process of identifying the schools to which additional funding – public or private – would be allocated.

The group also agreed that policy changes should explicitly take into account questions of **access for special needs and ELL students**.