How the Common Core Must Ensure Equity by Fully Preparing *Every* Student for Postsecondary Success

Recommendations from the Regional Equity Assistance Centers on Implementation of the Common Core State Standards

Equity Assistance Centers Support the Common Core State Standards

The 10 regional Equity Assistance Centers (EACs) are committed to the successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core). We believe that the development and adoption of these new standards represents a significant and vitally important step for our nation, and we enthusiastically support this effort to promote rigorous, high-quality education and positive outcomes for all students. The Common Core provide a clear, consistent definition of what students are expected to learn and what is needed to prepare all students for success in postsecondary college or career preparation and life in the 21st century. The EACs support effective implementation of the standards so that, as individual states and as a country, we may finally ensure success for all students, regardless of their race, national origin, linguistic background, physical abilities, or economic status.

The establishment of the Common Core was a critical move in the right direction for K–12 education, reflecting a national priority to improve students' readiness for college or career preparation. In guiding development of the new standards, the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers were specific about what they wanted. The English language arts standards, for example, were to be (1) research- and evidence-based, (2) aligned with college and work expectations, (3) rigorous, and (4) internationally benchmarked.[1] For their part, the mathematics standards were to be more focused, coherent, clear, and specific than past standards. Thus, for the math-standards developers, the work began with research-based learning progressions detailing what is currently known about how students' mathematical knowledge, skill, and understanding develop over time.[2] Today, 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the new standards.

Given this broad acceptance of the new, more rigorous standards, the Common Core have great potential for preparing all students to meet the century's challenges. Yet this promise can only be realized if the standards are implemented with a sharp and consistent focus on ensuring education equity. Important as it is to provide a more rigorous education, greater

rigor alone does nothing to address the underlying causes of our longstanding achievement gaps. In fact, because the new standards demand more of students and teachers alike, if the Common Core are implemented without adequate supports for all students, and for those serving them, the inequities long inherent in American education will persist and deepen, with greater numbers of our most vulnerable students pushed into failure.

To ensure that, as intended, these new standards result in an excellent education and equally high outcomes for all students, educators and our education institutions must themselves be prepared and supported to intervene successfully with students who are performing well below grade level; to understand and be able to provide the full range of support needed for students who are English language learners (ELLs), special education students, and other historically underserved and underrepresented student populations; and to offer high-quality instruction across the board, along with academic supports, social-emotional support, and college and career technical counseling.

In short, the positive potential of these new standards can only be realized if state and local policymakers, education leaders, and practitioners view equity as both an essential means to and an essential outcome of Common Core implementation. During implementation, they must carefully examine and evaluate existing and proposed systems, policies, procedures, and practices to understand their impact on all student groups, especially those that have heretofore been underserved and underrepresented in the statistics for successful students.

Almost 60 years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education,* we are still struggling to ensure the civil rights and equitable education of all students—a sad fact that underscores the urgency of implementing the Common Core in such a way as to serve *all* students equally well. In this document, the EACs provide key questions and recommendations to help educators identify and address equity issues to ensure that no student is denied the opportunities promised by these new standards.

The Equity Lens and Equity Context

Adoption and implementation of the Common Core comes at a critical time in our nation's education history. In 2005, when the Commom Core initiative began, it was clear that not enough students—particularly students of color, ELL students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, students in inner cities and rural areas, and those in alternative schools—were graduating from high school prepared for success, either in postsecondary education or career-development programs. Clearly, traditional ways of conducting the business of education have not been effective for many students.

Concerted efforts to ensure students' civil rights and education equity have been underway since the mid-20th century, and have been mapped into the following six "generations."[3]

1954–1964 (first generation)—Litigation shaped civil rights, including education, starting with *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

1964–1983 (second generation)—Legislation redefined the civil rights landscape and education, starting with the passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*.

1983–1990 (third generation)—State-driven reform efforts refocused the civil rights conversation on issues beyond access, starting with the report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.

1990–2000 (fourth generation)—State and national government reform efforts focused on how public education should support excellence for all, starting with the 1994 National Governors Association meeting on education challenging the country to look forward to the new century.

2001–2011 (fifth generation)—This generation was characterized by national discourse on educational and civil rights and by passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which required public schools to be accountable for disaggregated student-achievement outcomes.

2012–present (sixth generation)—The current generation started with the Obama administration's Blueprint for Reform, outlining the re-envisioned federal role in education,[4] and with adoption of the Common Core. It is being shaped by a focus on increased curricular rigor, on ensuring that students graduate from high school ready for success in college or postsecondary job training, and on effective leadership and quality teaching to ensure that students are successful.

We have entered the sixth generation facing many challenges. Chief among them are the persistent achievement gaps between different ethnic and economic groups; ongoing disproportionality in the student groups represented in special education, in gifted and talented programs, and in disciplinary categories; unacceptable school dropout rates; and continued low college-going and college-completion rates for students of color, ELL students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. If the Common Core are to achieve their promise of success for all students, they must be implemented in ways that can directly address and resolve these critical issues. The kind of high-quality education envisioned in the Common Core cannot remain a privilege reserved for only some students; it is an absolute requirement for *all* students. But are we up to the challenges? According to the Equity and Excellence Commission in its recent report, resolving this nation's achievement gaps is "eminently doable" because the Common Core provide "a unique moment to leverage excellence and equity for all and to build on efforts to foster critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, and communication."[5] Thus, it is the hope—indeed the expectation—of the EACs that this new generation will see real and measurable improvements in opportunities and outcomes for underserved and underrepresented students.

The EACs have the unique charge of ensuring students' civil rights, by providing assistance at every level of education, from federal and state to district and school. We believe that realizing the full potential of the Common Core requires that education decision-makers and practitioners use an equity lens as the optic through which all implementation-related decisions are filtered and analyzed, with the aim of making equity-oriented decisions. More specifically, educators and decision-makers at all levels of the educational enterprise should, at a minimum, examine their systems, policies, procedures, and practices using the following questions:

- How does this (system/policy/procedure/practice) affect all learners?
- Can we identify negative or adverse consequences for any identifiable population as a result of this system, policy, procedure, and practice? How might that adverse impact be avoided?

- As we create new systems, policies, procedures, and practices, what precautions should we take to avoid negative consequences?
- How do we monitor our work and ensure equally positive outcomes for all students?
- How do we change our systems, policies, procedures, and practices to produce fair and equitable outcomes for students and their families?
- How do we engage students, families, and communities in meaningful ways and as partners in decision-making and implementation of the Common Core?

When these questions are used consistently as a lens for decision-making, the cumulative Common Core implementation decisions should yield an *equity context,* in which *all* systems and structures work to ensure that no learner is denied the fair and equitable benefit afforded to all other students, regardless of the learner's race, gender, national origin, linguistic background, economic level, or physical ability.

Six Goals of Education Equity

So what does an equity context look like? Six goals of education equity have been identified[6] and endorsed by the EACs, which, if fully achieved in implementation of the Common Core, would result in an equity context:

- Comparably high academic achievement and other positive outcomes for all students on all achievement indicators
- Equitable access and inclusion
- Equitable treatment
- Equitable resource distribution
- Equitable opportunity to learn
- Shared accountability

These six areas are not discrete; inequities in one area often are linked to inequities in other areas. Over time, accumulated education inequities across these areas create what Gloria Ladson-Billings refers to as an "educational debt" owed to those who have been denied access to quality education.[7]

If these six goals are not met in Common Core implementation, the new standards will only add to the educational debt, as reflected in widening achievement gaps and in even fewer students graduating from high school ready to succeed in postsecondary schooling or career preparation. Thus, the EACs assert that these six goals are, in fact, the goals of Common Core *implementation* to ensure all students' readiness for college and career preparation.

GOAL 1 Ensure comparable positive outcomes for all students on all achievement indicators

The U.S. Department of Education describes achievement gaps as "the difference in academic performance between subgroups of students and their peers."[8] These persistent and pernicious gaps are the ultimate testament to the failure on the part of many of our education systems, policies, procedures, and practices to equitably serve the full range of students. This first, overarching equity goal is to eliminate those gaps in favor of comparable positive outcomes for all students. Although the Common Core mission does not explicitly address this issue of achieving equally, or comparably, positive education outcomes, it certainly paints an inclusive picture of what "our young people" need for postsecondary success:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.[9]

Fulfilling the Common Core mission demands that we eliminate achievement gaps. Ultimately, education equity means that *every* American student will attain high academic outcomes, with achievement and performance gaps virtually nonexistent.[10] At any level, (state, district, school, or classroom) disaggregated test scores, attendance data, promotion and graduation rates, and all other student outcomes should reveal comparable high performance for all student populations.

GOAL 2 Ensure equitable access to education services and inclusion for all students

Despite numerous laws, regulations, and guidance intended to help ensure students' rights to have access to and be included in education programs, there is strong evidence that disproportionality along the color line continues to be a major problem across the country. Disproportionality, which refers to the under- and overrepresentation of students in a particular program, is not limited to special education or gifted and talented programs. Over- and underrepresentation is also found in other programs; both school-based and extracurricular opportunities; scholarships; courses and other curricular offerings; and supports, such as comprehensive counseling programs.[11] Disproportionality is also evident in the use of certain disciplinary measures, such as the comparatively higher use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for African American and Latino student populations.

Educators must review and revise current systems, policies, procedures, and practices for identifying and selecting students to participate in education programs. All students and their parents must have access to information to make knowledgeable decisions about students' programs of study. Specifically, improving equity requires removing barriers to high-level courses as well as providing extra instructional time in English language arts and math for struggling students and those who arrive at school lagging their peers academically. Additionally, educators must ensure that the use of grade-point averages or test scores as filters for program access does not create barriers that prohibit underrepresented and underserved students from participating in

instructional and extracurricular programs. Over time, the combined impact of disproportionality, barriers to opportunities, lack of information, and lack of support creates a cumulative adverse impact on students of color and other underserved student populations that is reflected in achievement gaps. Unless the education community recognizes and resolves these challenges, it will be impossible for many students to be successful with the Common Core.

Significant work is being conducted on instructional supports for ELL students, in particular how to help them benefit from the Common Core. In their overview paper for a recent conference to launch the new Understanding Language Initiative in Stanford University's School of Education,[12] conference co-chairs Kenji Hakuta and Maria Santos note that "English language learners have a right to appropriate education that is grounded in sound theory and implemented in ways that address their needs systematically, through coordinated support linking teachers, materials, formative assessments, tests and accountability systems, and technology."[13]

The EACs agree with this statement and applaud the work that Hakuta and Santos are leading. We further argue that *every* student has a right to the kind of education described by Hakuta and Santos, and we challenge the education community, in implementing the Common Core, to consider how best to address the needs of all underserved and underrepresented student populations.

GOAL 3 Ensure equitable treatment for all students

We define equitable treatment as patterns of interaction between all individuals within an environment that are characterized by acceptance, respect, support, and safety. Students should feel challenged to become invested in the pursuits of learning and excellence without fear of threat, humiliation, or danger, all of which undermine students' ability to succeed. Inequitable treatment of students can also compound negative consequences. For example, the disproportionate use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions contribute to higher absentee rates for African American and Latino student populations, and high absenteeism is a key contributor to academic failure and even to students' decisions to drop out.[14]

Educators must examine the affect of their systems, policies, procedures, and practices on *all* students and their parents. For example, systems that serve ELL students but do not provide these students and their parents with critical information in any language other than English are clearly, if unintentionally, imposing barriers to the success of these students and the involvement of their families. Additionally, while algebra and geometry are critical "gatekeeper" courses for upper-level secondary mathematics and science coursework and college entrance, a frequent practice in many districts is to steer struggling students into courses that "dumb down" the mathematics content. Moreover, such courses lead nowhere, leaving students unprepared to pursue postsecondary education. The Common Core have increased the rigor in elementary and secondary mathematics and, if the promise of these standards is to be realized, educators must give all students equitable access to this content by providing instructional supports (e.g., scaffolding) when necessary. Without such supports we virtually guarantee that many students will not succeed in algebra and geometry; as a result, they will be denied access to higher-level secondary math courses such as calculus, to science courses, and ultimately to college.

GOAL 4 Ensure equitable resource distribution

At this time, there are cumulative inequities in the distribution of essential education resources. Such resources include, for example, a rigorous curriculum, high-quality instructional materials, personalized attention for students, enrichment opportunities, and, most important, expert teachers.

Because the Common Core demand more of teachers and students alike, the standards have prompted much discussion among policymakers and educators across the country about improving the quality of teachers. However, much less attention is being paid to improving the *distribution* of expert teachers. The research shows that compared to low-poverty schools, high-poverty schools, on average, have more teachers with less experience and fewer advanced degrees. This means that with more experienced, better educated, and, ultimately, more expensive teachers gravitating toward affluent schools, districts are spending more on schools in affluent areas.

In addition to having effective teachers, all students should have access to quality administrators, counselors, and other support staff. In collective bargaining states and districts, school boards, administrators, and unions should work together to ensure that the students most in need have access to high-quality teachers, administrators, and support staff. To identify and resolve inequities, districts must carefully examine and compare what they spend on teacher salaries and other non-teacher-related expenditures in high-poverty, high-minority schools versus what they spend in lower-poverty schools with smaller populations of minority students.

The "digital divide" represents a key resource inequity for many communities. The assessments being developed by PARCC[15] and Smarter Balanced[16] to align with the Common Core include accommodations for students with disabilities. However, many communities have limited or no access to computers and other technologies, or have inadequate technology. Educators must provide access to high-quality technology for those communities, including technology-support staff, and must ensure that continued advances in the use of technology in education do not create or contribute to even greater divides between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

In addition to the limitations on computers and other technology, high-poverty schools tend to have inadequate libraries, outdated instructional materials, fewer supplies, inadequate laboratories, insufficient equipment (e.g., in science labs), and fewer enrichment opportunities for students. Too often students are excluded from participation in education opportunities and successes due to costs. For example, even if a school has a band or orchestra, participation requires that students have musical instruments and have received instruction on how to play them. At one time, schools provided such opportunities (both instruments and instruction), but in many schools today, most especially those in low-income communities, tight budgets have pushed music, art, and other "enrichment" classes out, so that the only students with access are those with sufficient private means.

Finally, fiscal inequities must be addressed if we are to successfully implement the Common Core. Resources should be reallocated to provide professional development and ongoing coaching for teachers and other professionals, as well as academic and other supports for students. The allocation of discretionary and other funds must reduce, and not contribute to, inequities.

GOAL 5 Ensure equitable opportunities to learn for all students

The kinds of resources discussed above are essential but not sufficient for student learning. *Opportunities to learn* (OTL) refer to the sum total of what is needed to guarantee student learning. So while OTL include requisite resources, such as books and other materials, they also include effective instructional practices and conditions conducive to learning, such as a safe and supportive school climate. In their seminal 1993 article on the topic of OTL, Smith and O'Day write, "It is not legitimate to hold students accountable unless they have been given the opportunity to learn the material on the examination. Similarly, teachers or schools cannot be legitimately held accountable for how well their students do unless they have the preparation and resources to provide the students the opportunity to learn."[17]

Educators at every level—state, district, school, classroom—must assess the adequacy, quality, and equity of students' opportunities to learn by asking whether their systems, policies, procedures, and/or practices

- enable all students to learn rigorous content,
- enable all students to achieve at high levels,
- consider the diverse, multiple ways in which students learn,
- enable all teachers to teach all students,
- reflect the best classroom practice and research,
- support ongoing professional development of educators,
- ensure safe and secure environments, free of prejudice and violence,
- provide every student access to the most current education technology, updated libraries, and well-equipped science labs,
- provide students with career exposure and work-based experience, and
- offer opportunities for preschool and learning outside the school walls.[18]

Improving and ensuring equitable OTL for all students requires a related focus on the administrators, teachers, and staff who serve them. As implementation of the Common Core continues, states and districts must ensure that all those serving students have access to ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development for teachers, instructional leaders, and others that includes coaching and feedback on all aspects of the Common Core. Preparation for all teachers must focus on increasing their ability to effectively reach and teach any student, differentiating instruction and supports to sufficiently meet their needs.

America's commitment to high-quality education for all students is realized when students have equitable opportunities to learn. States, districts, and schools that provide equitable opportunities to learn the content addressed in the Common Core will enable students to become lifelong learners and lead productive, rewarding lives.

GOAL 6 Ensure equitable shared accountability

Equitable shared accountability refers to shared responsibility and accountability across all education stakeholders for ensuring that appropriate and sufficient resources, qualified teachers, challenging curricula, opportunities to learn, and sufficient supports are available for every student. Blaming students for not being able to handle a rigorous curriculum, or asserting that some students will never be competent at a world-class level, is unacceptable and runs counter both to the vision underlying the Common Core and to the U.S. Department of Education's stance concerning education equity for all. Equitable shared accountability means that all stakeholders—school boards, administrators, teachers, and other staff—take responsibility and are held accountable for *all* students, including those students who are not succeeding.

For example, school boards, and those who elect them, must ensure that their local schools are adequately supported. Administrators establish the vision and set expectations for equitable student outcomes so that everyone understands his or her responsibility for ensuring that all students achieve. Administrators also establish a variety of support structures to ensure the capacity of all stakeholders to meet their responsibilities. Teachers and other staff participate in planning and goal setting that focuses on equitable student outcomes, and identify and implement the strategies that are needed to reach them.[19] Because equitable shared accountability is essential to the successful implementation of the Common Core, educators at every level must take responsibility for equitable, positive academic outcomes for all students.

Conclusion

An effective education that prepares our youth for postsecondary success should not be a privilege reserved for some students; rather, it should be a guarantee for every student. The Common Core promise just that—a quality education for all, one in which the new standards will be taught by highly qualified teachers under the leadership of skilled administrators, and students will receive adequate and appropriate supports to help ensure their success.

If the Common Core promise is to be fulfilled, all educators and education stakeholders must commit to excellence and equity, because *excellence cannot be achieved without equity*. The Common Core must be implemented with the intention of ensuring that *every* student receives the instruction necessary to produce the desired learning outcomes.

We have a moral imperative to implement the Common Core in a way that embraces and supports those who have been underserved by the education system in the past, so that every student achieves to his or her highest potential. It is only fair, just, and right that every student be provided a rigorous curriculum and high-quality instruction regardless of race, gender, national origin, linguistic background, economic level, physical ability or any other defining characteristic.

It is time for us to move forward on these matters of excellence and equity. The promise of the Common Core must be realized for *all* students and their families.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made with the intent of helping educators meet the six goals of equity to ensure that every student is equally well served by the Common Core. By every student, we particularly include those who traditionally have been underserved by our education systems and underrepresented in positive outcomes, including students of color, ELL students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students.

1. First and foremost, begin implementation of the Common Core with the end in mind: high achievement for *all* student populations.
2. Eliminate the concept of "significant subgroups" because all student populations are significant. Use disaggregated data to monitor for student progress and equity in achievement and other student outcomes, attending to all population subgroups.
3. Prepare and support administrators to effectively lead Common Core implementation so that all students have comparably high academic achievement and positive outcomes on all achievement indicators.
4. Create and provide appropriate professional development approaches to properly prepare all teachers, including core content teachers, to teach all students in a culturally appropriate and proficient manner.
5. Create and provide appropriate professional development for school counselors so they are able to provide appropriate and culturally responsive guidance and support for all students.
6. Rethink tiered systems of interventions to accommodate implementation of the Common Core. Provide appropriate professional development to teachers to implement tiered systems with fidelity and responsiveness to the real learning characteristics of the individual students in those systems.
7. Inform all parents and families about the Common Core and equip them to contribute to their children's success with the more rigorous curricula called for by the Common Core. In particular, empower the parents and families of students who have been traditionally underserved and underrepresented, creating a place for their voice and engagement in all aspects of their children's education experience.
8. Improve access to academic counseling for all students, especially struggling students, and their families.
9. Provide students with the necessary, personalized academic and social supports, building their awareness of college and understanding of career pathways.
10. Extend responsibility for student success to all stakeholders, including school boards, educators at every level, parents, and students.

Suggested citation:

The Equity Assistance Centers. (2013). H*ow the Common Core must ensure equity by fully preparing every student for postsecondary success: Recommendations from the Regional Equity Assistance Centers on implementation of the Common Core State Standards.*

About the Equity Assistance Centers: The 10 Equity Assistance Centers are funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. They provide assistance in the areas of race, gender, and national origin equity to public schools to promote equal educational opportunities. Equity Assistance Centers provide training and technical assistance for state and local education agencies. For more information, visit www.equityassistancecenters.org

Endnotes

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