

Core of the Matter: Common Core in America's Great City Schools—Optimism Amidst the Noise (#CoreMatters)



The following blog post is another in the Alliance's ["Core of the Matter" blog series](#) focusing on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and struggling students. It was written by Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

While enthusiasm for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has waned on both the political left and right over the last several years, the nation's major urban public school systems have remained energetic backers of the guidelines because they provide a powerful lever by which we can raise academic expectations for our inner-city children and ensure equity. More than anyone else, the nation's urban public schools understand the toll that low expectations have taken on our children. The Common Core presents a critical opportunity to change that scenario.

Every urban school district that is part of our coalition either uses the new standards as the basis for instruction or is informed by them—all with the understanding that we see better academic attainment from our students when we expect it. Even in states where the standards never were adopted, large city school districts have used the new benchmarks as beacons for their instructional reforms. [Anchorage](#), for instance, adopted the Common Core even though Alaska did not.

The [District of Columbia Public Schools](#) stands out among urban school districts as being one of the more aggressive in its implementation of the Common Core. The district followed its initial personnel reforms with a relentless focus on the instructional changes it wanted to see in the city's classrooms. It revamped its scope and sequence documents to align with the Common

Core. It phased in its rollout of the standards by subject and grade. It put into place extensive professional development for teachers and school administrators alike and overhauled its instructional coaching system. This year, the district, which continues to see some of the nation's largest improvements in reading and math outcomes for students, is launching its [Cornerstone](#) project with new instructional lessons linked to the CCSS to build on these gains.

Other districts like [Fresno](#), [Denver](#), [Long Beach](#), and [Cleveland](#) also are being forceful in their implementation. Fresno, for instance, has devoted considerable energy to ensuring that its implementation of the standards meets the needs of its sizable number of English language learners. Denver has devoted considerable time to its assessment systems and has moved much of its implementation to the school site level. Meanwhile, Cleveland continues to double down on its classroom instruction as part of its larger Cleveland Plan initiatives.

These and other cities understand that while academic performance might not improve immediately, it will improve over the long-run and in a way that ensures that our urban children are college and career ready. Already, results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate that reading and math scores in the cities are improving faster than anywhere else in the country.

The Council itself, along with a number of other organizations, continues to develop tools to help its member districts with implementation and to inform the public about what the standards are and what they aren't. For instance, the organization prepared detailed guidelines to help its members get ready for PARCC and SBAC testing, which experienced few serious problems when they were administered for the first time in our districts last spring. We have a new [public service announcement](#) in the field that has been seen by over 100 million people in its first six months. And we recently launched new guidance for selecting [grade-level instructional materials](#) aligned to the content and rigor of the standards.

This doesn't mean that implementation of the standards has gone well everywhere. The truth is that implementation remains very uneven. Some places have enthusiastically embraced the standards, while others are more lackadaisical. Urban school districts will need to push each other harder to ensure that implementation is stronger everywhere.

To be sure, the wave of reforms that has swept the nation recently has left a lot of educators exhausted and dispirited, and likely has affected how willing many classroom teachers and school administrators are to put the new standards into place. The extraordinary turnover in urban school leaders and staff over the last two years and cuts in funding for public education during and after the recent recession also have taken a toll on the momentum that was building behind standards implementation. In addition, many urban school districts continue to report that their implementation is weakest with their English language learners and students with disabilities.

Still, when we polled parents of our Great City School students about a year ago, we found that more parents (48 percent) had a positive impression of the standards than a negative one (22 percent), while a significant portion (38 percent) remained unsure or unaware of the standards. When given a straight-forward description of what the standards were, 88 percent of

parents indicated that the new expectations would be either very or somewhat beneficial for their children.

The Great City Schools have found themselves once again at the center of an enormous tug-of-war that has pitted political forces against one another over the direction of our nation's public schools. But the work of these urban school systems continues to be anchored in the instructional reforms that are likely to pay the greatest dividends for our nation's urban schoolchildren. It is how we stay so optimistic in the midst of so much noise.

Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. You can follow the Council on Twitter at [@greatcityschls](https://twitter.com/greatcityschls).