

Supporting Michigan's Teachers: Smart Implementation of High Standards, Training, and Educator Evaluation



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The Education Trust–Midwest works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, from pre-kindergarten through college. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement for all children, particularly those from low-income families or who are African American, Latino, or American Indian — in Michigan and beyond. As a statewide education policy and advocacy organization, we are focused first and foremost on doing what is right for Michigan students. The Education Trust–Midwest is affiliated with the national organization, The Education Trust, based in Washington, D.C. Ed Trust–Midwest is the second state office of The Education Trust.



The Education Trust–Midwest

306 S. Washington Avenue, Suite 400, Royal Oak, MI 48067
P 734-619-8008 | F 734-619-8009 | www.edtrustmidwest.org

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BY SARAH W. LENHOFF

THE OPPORTUNITIES

Compared to their counterparts in other states, Michigan's students have lost substantial ground over the last decade. Our state has among the worst achievement gaps in the nation and new 2013 national assessment data show that our state is just not keeping up with the rest of the country – in achievement or improvement. Our African-American children are among the lowest-performing in the entire country. But even our white and higher income students are lagging increasingly behind their peers elsewhere. Clearly, we have to get moving – and fast.

For years, research has repeatedly demonstrated that teaching quality is our most powerful lever to improve student learning. Of all of the things that schools can control – including class size, curriculum, and textbooks – the quality of teaching that a child receives is the strongest determinant of student achievement. Low-income students who have effective teachers multiple years in a row can actually beat the odds – and close the achievement gap with higher-income students.¹

But in order for all students to have access to strong teachers, we must overhaul the way we prepare, support, and evaluate educators to assure that all – rather than just some – have the skills they need to prepare our students for life after high school. In the coming months, Michigan leaders have two historic opportunities to put our state on a path to do just that.

The first opportunity is the quality implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and assessment. If well implemented, this state-led effort will assure that our students learn what they need to know to be successful after high school, whether in college or a career, and also provide honest information to parents on where their children are on that journey. To teach to the new standards, teachers all over the state will need help in revising their curriculum and classroom practices

so that students are learning the critical reading, thinking, and analytical skills that set these new standards apart from our previous standards. Michigan lawmakers should follow the lead of other states by investing in intensive training of teachers so that they are prepared to meet the challenge.

The second opportunity involves implementation of Michigan's first statewide system of educator evaluation and support. At the direction of the state legislature, an internationally renowned leader in teacher preparation, Dr. Deborah Loewenberg Ball of the University of Michigan, led a group of experts in developing a blueprint for this system. Now the legislature needs to approve that blueprint and adequately fund its implementation by spring of 2014.

At first glance, these two initiatives may seem unrelated. In fact, their success is deeply intertwined. Together, they form a mutually reinforcing strategy to dramatically boost teacher support, feedback, and accountability. In time, this strategy holds great promise for improving the quality of instruction our students receive and, in turn, raising their levels of achievement so that they can compete with their peers across the country.

The Education Trust–Midwest – a team of Michiganders dedicated to raising achievement for all of our state's students – believes high expectations, in the form of Michigan's Common Core State Standards, play an important role in raising achievement. We also believe that our teachers will excel at teaching higher standards when they receive strong support. It will take time – and investment – to do this right, so that all teachers and students benefit.

Sarah W. Lenhoff is the Director of Policy and Research at the Education Trust - Midwest.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS' TRANSITION TO HIGHER STANDARDS

This fall, the Michigan Legislature smartly approved the continued funding and implementation of rigorous Common Core State Standards. But legislative approval is only the first step in ensuring that the new standards live up to their promise of raising the level of teaching and learning in our state. To see this through, Michigan leaders must commit to two steps of implementation, both of which are essential to supporting higher standards for students and teachers: Common Core-aligned state assessments and training.

1. COMMON CORE-ALIGNED STATE ASSESSMENTS

The state has now adopted rigorous academic standards in English language arts and math, which set benchmarks for what students need to know and be able to do in each grade to be on track for success after high school. In order to know whether our teachers and students are raising the level of teaching and learning to meet these standards, Michigan must adopt new assessments aligned to them. The Michigan Department of Education should choose new assessments that are aligned to the standards and will work best for Michigan. The state needs to fully fund the implementation of these assessments for the 2014-15 school year.

2. TRAINING ON MICHIGAN'S COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Michigan's Common Core standards will require educators to teach students at much higher levels – and to help them gain much deeper skills than ever before. For most teachers, even in the best schools, this will require significant shifts in instruction. Educators need training on the content of the new standards as well as the most effective ways to teach students so that they learn what the standards require. Michigan lawmakers should follow the lead of other states by investing in intensive training of teachers so that they are prepared to meet the challenge.

Tennessee, for instance, is one state that has recognized that just handing teachers the new standards is insufficient. Instead, a state and its districts must take responsibility for supporting teachers through this transition. As Tennessee was preparing to launch the standards for the first time, the state invested resources to directly – and intensively – train more than 13,000 educators across the state.ⁱⁱ Teachers raved about this opportunity to engage with the new standards and felt that it enabled them to truly make

the transition to Common Core classrooms. Earlier this year, Tennessee trained over 700 teachers to coach 35,000 of their peers over the summer.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kentucky, the first state to adopt the new standards, trained its school leaders on the Common Core so that they could support teachers in raising the level of their instruction. In addition, the state provided online on-demand Common Core professional development that every teacher in the state could access, including professional learning communities and opportunities for collaboration with fellow teachers.^{iv}

Guided by the example of leading states that have invested in training, we recommend that the legislature allocate new and existing professional development dollars to:

- Provide districts with funding specifically for supporting their teachers in transitioning to the Common Core.
- Fund optional training sessions for teacher leaders and teachers, focused on Common Core standards and best practices for instruction, for districts that need additional support for their teachers.
- Optional curricular materials aligned to the new standards, with teacher guides and instructional modules to support instruction.
- Training and infrastructure on the new technologies to support implementation and assessment of the new standards.

GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT ON EDUCATOR EVALUATION AND SUPPORT

For years, Michigan left the hard work of supporting and evaluating teachers up to local districts, many of which did not have the expertise, data, or capacity to provide reliable, developmental feedback to teachers. In 2011, legislators created the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness, a blue-ribbon panel of evaluation experts and practitioners from across Michigan, to develop recommendations for a statewide educator evaluation system. This summer, the Council released its final blueprint for how Michigan can begin to ensure that all teachers are getting the support, evaluation, and feedback they need to be effective. Now, the legislature must fill in the Council's recommendations with the details that will ensure successful implementation of the new system.

For the past three years, the non-partisan Education Trust—Midwest has studied best practices from other states that have

revamped their educator support, evaluation, and training systems, as well as those that have invested in training teachers on the new Common Core standards.

Based on those best practices, we have outlined seven essential details the legislature must get right in order to ensure that the new system fulfills the promise of improving teaching and learning in Michigan. Some of these are mostly a matter of enacting recommendations from the Council the legislature created; in other cases, we've outlined areas where action is necessary to move work forward on matters not addressed or fully resolved by the Council.

1. STATE-PROVIDED SMART STUDENT GROWTH MODEL

The core job of teachers is to grow the knowledge and skills of their students. For that reason, the Michigan Legislature wisely decided back in 2010 to require the inclusion of a student growth measure in educator evaluations.

Michigan is not alone: according to the National Council on Teacher Quality, teachers in 40 states and the District of Columbia are being evaluated, in part, by measures of their students' learning.⁷ Reliable student growth models use state assessment data to isolate the impact of teaching quality from that of other factors that influence student learning, such as students' previous achievement. Using this method, we can determine if teachers are helping their students learn more or less than expected, no matter what their achievement level or family background.

In order to ensure that districts incorporate reliable student growth measures in their evaluations, Michigan lawmakers should:

- Require the Michigan Department of Education to work with a vendor to produce a state-provided student growth model and growth data for all teachers of state tested subjects and grades. That growth model should be based on Common Core-aligned assessments, control for prior student achievement, and include a roster verification process so that teachers and administrators can confirm that the students whose growth is attributed to them are actually their students.
- For teachers in tested grades and subjects, 50 percent of the student growth measure should be based on the state growth model. Allow districts to use local growth data for the other portion of the student growth measure and for teachers of non-tested subjects and grades.
- Require the Michigan Department of Education to establish

guidelines for measuring student growth for teachers of non-tested grades and subjects, as well as for the use of local data as "second measures" of performance in tested subjects and grades. In particular, the state should produce guidance on using student learning objectives reliably and accurately; develop or adopt assessments in high volume non-core subjects, such as foreign language; and determine when and how school-wide student growth data can be appropriately used in teacher evaluations.

- Require evaluators to be trained on how to use, interpret, and explain student growth to the teachers they are evaluating.

2. STATE-APPROVED TOOLS FOR OBSERVING TEACHER PRACTICE

Every teacher's evaluation should include observations of that teacher's actual practices in the classroom. While administrators have conducted observations of their teachers for decades, most of them have not been focused on the instructional practices research says improve student learning. Now, there are research-based observation tools that, with the proper training, guide observers – administrators and fellow teachers – to identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses and help facilitate conversations about how to improve. Instead of every observer seeing something completely different when he or she enters a classroom, these tools can help establish consistency and reliability in observations, making feedback more helpful in improving teaching and learning. The Michigan Legislature should:

- Require the Michigan Department of Education to establish a list of approved observation tools that districts can choose from. The approved list should include the four research-based observation tools recommended by the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness: Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model, The Thoughtful Classroom, and 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning.
- Tie the use of one of these tools to best practices funds, which incentivize school districts to use student-focused, research-based approaches to education.
- Require all observers to participate in training on the observation tool their district has chosen to use and be certified as reliable observers.
- Require the Michigan Department of Education to

periodically review and modify the approved observation tools to ensure that they are working properly and are fully aligned with the instructional shifts demanded by the Common Core State Standards.

3. SUPPORTING QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION AND LOCAL SCHOOLS

Local districts are struggling with some parts of evaluation more than others. Beyond measuring growth, local districts and charter schools report they need the most help in learning how to fairly combine multiple measures of data (such as classroom observation, student growth and other measures) into one final annual performance rating for teachers.

In Illinois and other states, state leaders appointed a Performance Evaluation Advisory Council to establish regulations and monitor initial implementation of that state's new educator evaluation system. Similarly, Michigan leaders should authorize the Michigan Department of Education to convene a voluntary committee of leading policy experts, educators, and representatives of parents, students and civic leaders to work with the MDE to:

- Develop a common scoring framework to help administrators combine observation and student growth data for districts using a state-approved observation tool.
- Establish clear standards for districts that want to opt out of the approved observation tools. Review and approve the tools of any such districts, requiring them to submit evidence that they are research-based, implemented with fidelity, and include rigorous training to ensure inter-rater reliability.
- Assist in developing guidelines for measuring student growth for teachers of non-tested grades and subjects.
- Identify districts innovating with effective teacher evaluation practices and highlight their work in annual reports to the legislature, as examples of how other districts may improve their practices.

4. MASTER TEACHERS

For the first time, Michigan will soon be able to identify the state's best teachers — or we will, if we do this right. But just knowing who they are won't accomplish much. State leaders and local districts should create policies to reward them and leverage their expertise to improve student learning across the state:

- The legislature should establish a Michigan Master Teacher

designation for teachers who have been rated “highly effective” for at least three out of the last five years under the new evaluation system.

- Local districts should provide opportunities for master teachers to take on leadership roles in their schools, so they can assist with peer evaluation, coaching, and professional development.
- The Michigan Department of Education should create incentives for master teachers to develop adult training skills and participate in educating their peers across the state.
- Local districts should allow Michigan Master Teachers and district-identified high performing teachers to conduct observations and provide mentoring and feedback of other teachers as part of the evaluation process.

5. RESPECTING BOTH PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN PUBLIC REPORTING

In order for the new educator support and evaluation system to actually improve teaching and learning, Michigan needs to approach public reporting of evaluation data in a way that respects both parents and educators. That means, like other parts of personnel records, neither evaluation ratings nor any portion thereof—including value-added scores—should be made public for individual teachers. However, parents should have access to aggregate evaluation data, so they have a far better sense of the quality of the teaching in their public schools. Thus, the state should:

- Require districts to report building and district aggregate teacher evaluation ratings to the Michigan Department of Education.
- Starting in five years, make it unlawful to assign any student to an ineffective teacher for two consecutive years.
- Require the MDE to post the aggregate school, district, and state data on its website throughout each year on a “Teaching Quality” webpage where parents can review how their district and school is doing on this important issue, and to update the data annually. The MDE also should include the data as part of the state's Dashboard.
- Require the MDE to collect student growth data, observation ratings, and final evaluation ratings for confidential researcher access, and to share summary data on a bi-annual basis through a public report to the Michigan legislature. This would help keep state policymakers abreast of the work

happening at the state and local level.

- Like other parts of personnel records, neither evaluation ratings nor any portion thereof—including value-added scores—should be made public for individual teachers.

6. FAIR ACCESS TO QUALITY TEACHERS

One of the most important by-products of Michigan’s statewide educator support and evaluation system will be unprecedented data on teacher quality and equity in our state. For the first time, we will be able to identify which students have regular access to great teachers, and which students are taught by ineffective teachers, year in and year out. Research tells us that low-income students, students of color, and low-performing students of all races are typically less likely to be taught by effective teachers than their higher income, white, and higher-performing peers.

To ensure that ineffective or minimally effective teachers do not disproportionately teach some students, the state should:

- Require the Michigan Department of Education to annually report publicly the distribution of teacher effectiveness between the highest- and lowest-poverty and highest- and lowest-minority schools, both statewide and for all districts and charter management organizations with at least 25 schools. The MDE should also report information on the percentage of students in the state and in each district who are assigned teachers who are rated highly effective, effective, minimally effective, and ineffective by student race, English language learner status, and special education status.
- Require districts to ensure that low-income students and students of color have equitable access to highly effective teachers, and are not taught disproportionately by the least effective teachers.
- Require districts with significant equity gaps to develop action plans focused on attracting strong teachers and principals to the district and on improving teaching and leadership quality in their lowest performing schools.
- Require the MDE to annually monitor districts’ progress on closing equity gaps and hold them accountable for closing them.
- Prohibit the state’s lowest performing schools from employing teachers and school leaders who are not rated effective or highly effective.
- Tie additional best practices funding to districts that have small or no gaps in access to effective teachers.

7. SMART IMPLEMENTATION: SYNCHING TIMELINES FOR COMMON CORE, EDUCATOR SUPPORT, AND EVALUATION

It is essential that Michigan move forward with implementing the educator evaluation system as soon as possible – teachers need feedback on their performance now, and our students can’t wait. But, because the Common Core standards and assessments will be new to teachers and students, it makes sense to delay using the new tests in teacher evaluation until they have been implemented for three years. In the interim, teachers and principals should be evaluated based on observations and local measures of growth, and they should receive individual growth data from the state, but for information purposes only. It also makes sense to pause school accountability ratings during the shift to the first full implementation of the Common Core-aligned assessments.

Given the potential of inadequate state funding for implementation of these initiatives, we have recommended a sensible roadmap for staggered implementation that takes into account the urgency and importance of this work, prioritizing the investments outlined in the chart on page 6.

SMART IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017
CCSS IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training from ISDs and local districts continues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDE provides training from a high-quality vendor to districts that need additional Common Core support. • State provides access to optional instructional modules and curricular materials. • State conducts annual survey of educators to gauge understanding of Common Core, usefulness of training, and changes in practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State continues to provide access to optional instructional modules and curricular materials. • State offers optional training to teacher leaders and leader-facilitated training to other teachers. 	
CCSS ASSESSMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field Test. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administer assessments for Grades 3-8, 11. 		
MEASURING CCSS PERFORMANCE FOR SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly report state, district and school results from current state assessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results from new CCSS assessment reported to schools and public. • Previous year's accountability designations stay in place; no new consequences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School proficiency and growth results reported to school and public. • New accountability designations are assigned to schools. 	
TEACHER EVALUATION IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDE establishes a list of approved observation tools. • Districts choose an approved observation tool or apply to opt out. • MDE and Advisory Board establish criteria for opting out and issue decisions on those districts that applied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on Common Core-aligned observation tool and incorporating and explaining student growth data for all evaluators begins in summer 2014. • State conducts survey of educators to gauge understanding of evaluation processes and usefulness of training. • MDE issues a common scoring framework to assist evaluators in combining observation data and student growth data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued training on Common Core-aligned observations and giving feedback to support Common Core instruction. • MDE reviews its list of approved observation tools and makes modifications based on initial implementation results and new research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training continues.
MEASURING GROWTH FOR TEACHER EVALUATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDE issues guidance on measuring student growth, particularly for non-tested grades/subjects in summer 2014. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDE establishes a contract with a vendor to produce growth data for tested subjects and grades. • Teachers and principals in tested subjects and grades get individual data for informational purposes only; these data are not incorporated into individual ratings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and principals in tested subjects and grades get individual growth data for informational purposes; these data are not incorporated into individual ratings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers in tested subjects and grades get individual growth data. • 50 percent of the growth component is based on state growth data for teachers in tested grades and subjects.
PUBLIC REPORTING OF OUTCOMES FROM EDUCATOR EVALUATION SYSTEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly report state, district and school aggregate educator evaluation ratings, including by student subgroups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to publicly report state, district and school aggregate educator evaluation ratings, including by student subgroups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly report state, district and school aggregate educator evaluation ratings and aggregate growth results for all schools, including by student subgroups. 	

ENDNOTES

- i Gordon, R., Kane, T. J., & Staiger, D. O. (2006). Identifying effective teachers using performance on the job. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- ii “Tennessee Launches Its Largest-Ever Teacher Training to Prepare for Common Core Implementation,” accessed December 9, 2013, <http://news.tn.gov/node/9182>.
- iii “Tennessee Selects More Than 700 Teachers to Help Lead Common Core Transition,” accessed December 9, 2013, <http://news.tn.gov/node/10475>.
- iv “How Kentucky Plans to Integrate Common Core Training,” accessed December 9, 2013, <http://www.schoolimprovement.com/common-core-360/blog/How-Kentucky-Plans-to-Integrate-Common-Core-Training/>.
- v Kathryn M. Doherty and Sandi Jacobs, “State of the states 2013: Connect the dots: Using evaluation of teacher effectiveness to inform policy and practice,” (Washington, D.C.: The National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). http://www.nctq.org/dmsStage/State_of_the_States_2013_Using_Teacher_Evaluations_NCTQ_Report.



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