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## MEMORANDUM

TO: **Interested Parties**  
FROM: **Penn Hill Group**  
DATE: **April 24, 2014**  
SUBJECT: **CCSSO panel on Common Core Implementation**

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The Council of Chief State School Officers  
“How is Common Core Implementation Really Going?”

### Overview:

On April 23, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) held a briefing on improving the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The four panelists spoke of their states’ efforts with teacher professional development, accountability systems and responses to Common Core pushback, among other topics.

### Speakers:

- Dr. June Atkinson, North Carolina Superintendent of Public Schools
- Mr. Kevin Huffman, Tennessee Commissioner of Education
- Dr. Lillian Lowery, Maryland Superintendent of Schools
- Ms. Hanna Skandera, New Mexico Secretary-Designate of Education
- Moderator: Mr. Andrew Rotherham, co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education
- Mr. Chris Minnich, Executive Director, CCSSO

### Discussion:

**Chris Minnich** said that the public narrative on Common Core implementation is not going well, but there are states that have been successful. He noted the importance of time spent on implementation. He highlighted cases of successful school leader and teacher training and professional development—North Carolina has trained over 50,000 educators, Tennessee has hired over 750 coaches to help districts and teachers, Maryland has trained over 40,000 teachers in all 24 of its districts, and New Mexico is training teachers in 81 percent of its districts. He remarked that high standards should not be overlooked due to politics.

**Andrew Rotherham** asked about the status of implementation in the panelists’ states.

**June Atkinson** said that North Carolina recognizes that implementing any standards is a challenge that requires professional development, resources and a meaningful training structure. She said there is widespread support from teachers, their associations, the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce and the state Parent Teacher Association (PTA), among others, for Common Core because those standards gives students options. She said North Carolina has a lot of collaboration and its work includes hiring and developing coordinators, working with districts to build their own implementation plans, holding statewide workshops and providing resources developed on a technology platform called Home Base. North Carolina, she

said, will also hire teachers who will receive professional development and later help other teachers. She explained that, in 2014, only 49 percent of teachers are in the same classrooms as they were in 2010; that number is smaller for principals. She stated that that was an ongoing challenge but there are successes from teacher training, such as teachers being able to show students how they can use what they're learning.

**Hanna Skandera** said New Mexico adopted the Common Core in 2010 and, since then, has had a partisan administration change but continued to keep its commitment to implementing the standards. She said that New Mexico has formed a group of educators to consult and create a statewide implementation plan, noting that educator training occurs across the state. She explained that the state reached out to educators early and keeps them engaged through training and professional development. She said that 81 percent of the state's districts have signed up for a two-day summit and additional training throughout the year. She said the state works with higher education (including teacher preparation) programs, noting that they are providing online training modules that can count for credit. As for parent and community outreach, she said the state is partnering with the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and Native American groups to provide multi-language informational brochures for parents of students in each age group.

**Kevin Huffman** explained that Tennessee was engaged from the start on Common Core and continued its support, even through shifts in political party power. He said that Tennessee has invested more work and money on the Common Core than on any other standards. He explained that about 40,000 teachers participated in intense summer training and that there are about 750 Common Core coaches who know the material on a deeper level and are being called upon to help teachers in schools. He stated that there are also courses for school leaders on transitioning to the Common Core. He also explained that new assessments were developed that are more aligned with the Common Core, citing an example of a writing exam where students have to demonstrate mastery of text and use evidence. In addition, he said, the state has excellent website and library resources. He noted that from surveys, teachers believe the training will help with their instruction, noting that those who attended training have done better than those who didn't in raising student outcomes.

**Lillian Lowery** said Maryland rebranded the Common Core as the Maryland College and Career-Readiness Standards and raised its efforts to better engage parents and explain why the state chose these standards. She explained that Maryland is generally high-performing but has an achievement gap. She said that the state held six forums within the community, noting that while there were disagreements, there was also collaboration. She referenced the annual Educator Effectiveness Academies that began in 2011, where the state took feedback and improved on training, such as adding principal training in the third year. She noted that each district had to send a team to the training as the state knew the local educational agencies would have to build the curriculum themselves. She said Maryland is also working with two external evaluators—WestEd and the University of Maryland System. She explained that WestEd is looking at the implementation so Maryland could share best practices.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked what North Carolina has been doing differently in the implementation of the Common Core versus other standards.

**Dr. Atkinson** answered that North Carolina revised all of the state's standards at once, which was a first. The challenge to that, she explained, was that there had to be professional development for all teachers, not just certain groups. She said that with Race to the Top, the state has spent \$22 million on professional development and local school district



implementation of those standards. She also said this is the first time in recent history that the state had dedicated dollars to implementing standards and had professional development written into teacher contracts. She also noted a current issue of people not reading the Common Core, but still criticizing it.

**Ms. Skandera** said New Mexico is more sophisticated in using online resources. She stated that New Mexico is engaging parents in a more proactive way. She also explained that while the state's standards had been generally high-ranked, its student achievement is not good. By adopting Common Core, she said, the state made a commitment to not only having high standards, but also across-the-board training and accountability.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked about the hardest, unanticipated aspect of implementation.

**Mr. Huffman** said there were many surprises in the past year; he explained that the adoption and implementation process for Common Core has been transparent and well-planned for over four years. He said that, in light of that effort, the political pushback from the political right and left was a surprise. He noted that a positive aspect is that the state is seeing that professional development makes a positive difference in teacher performance. He also said another surprise was that state teacher union leadership originally endorsed the Common Core, but have now come out against it due to the call for more robust assessments. He commented that the rationale behind this decision—that Tennessee should not be a part of Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) because the state's students should not be compared to other students unless Tennessee spends more money—is negative.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked what Common Core proponents could have done differently to avoid problems.

**Dr. Lowery** said that proponents underestimated the pushback, but noted that while criticism is coming from the right and left, it is not coming from the classrooms. She explained that the standards shift is occurring in classrooms, but that it is hard for teachers who need more resources and training. She called for staying focused on the ongoing work and creating safe zones to protect teachers, but also for paying attention to the political noise because it is getting in the way of implementation.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked how to create safe places when states are implementing teacher evaluation systems that are driving a lot of the Common Core opposition.

**Dr. Lowery** said that when she began as state superintendent, Maryland had tests that were not aligned with the new standards. She said they used those tests anyway because they needed data points, but that they are getting new standards-aligned assessments based on a proficiency-growth model next year. She noted that because of this, Maryland has to reset its annual measurable objectives.

**Ms. Skandera** stated that teachers love the Common Core. She explained that when one takes a standard and applies accountability, the issue is not implementation but delay. She said that as implementation draws closer, these standards are going to identify strengths and weaknesses. She stated that when accountability comes into play, there's a delay and people back away. She noted that this story has already played out historically.

**Dr. Atkinson** said North Carolina did have aligned-assessments and that it began accountability systems in 1996 and a teacher evaluation system in 2006, before Common Core.



She said the state General Assembly requires an accountability system that includes testing and teacher evaluation, regardless of which standards the state adopted.

**Mr. Huffman** said Tennessee tries to provide very extensive training, access to no-stakes assessment and significant feedback, noting that it is in its third year of its teacher evaluation process which includes value-added scores. He also noted that the first year of PARCC counted for roughly 11 to 12 percent of a teacher's evaluation score. He explained that Tennessee's idea of a safe space was to give teachers tools to succeed.

**Dr. Lowery** said that in discussing accountability, it is important to separate the Common Core conversation and the accountability conversation. She said that Common Core proponents need to make sure the conversation is about standards and make sure they are not confounding standards with something else.

**Ms. Skandera** stated that children do not get a redo in school, explaining that the conversation needs to turn from believing in high standards to delivering on high standards.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked if the politics around Common Core are getting in the way of implementation.

**Dr. Atkinson** said that standards are necessary but not sufficient. She questioned what would replace high standards and noted that if one stopped the current momentum, there would be chaos and accountability issues.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked about substantive problems.

**Dr. Huffman** said that uncertainty creates trust issues and substantive problems. He said that most teachers are doing great jobs and that Tennessee is providing professional development. He explained that there will be additional people who do not want to come to the table, which creates uncertainty. He referenced a recent Education Week article that discussed uncertainty for teachers and noted that while some people point to policymakers as those creating uncertainty, it is actually teacher representatives who create it.

**Mr. Rotherham** commented that opponents of Common Core say that corporate interests are behind the standards, but they support replacing Common Core assessments with other incumbent and corporate providers.

**Dr. Huffman** agreed and said that Common Core offers opportunities for more competition and allows developers of good materials to introduce their products.

**Ms. Skandera** also noted that there are very large companies with a high stake in instruction materials.

**An audience member** asked for advice to states, especially those without Race to the Top dollars, that are further behind in implementation. She asked if it was realistic to repurpose federal dollars.

**Ms. Skandera** replied that New Mexico is not a Race to the Top state. She said that the state provides the transition plan and timeline. She explained that dollars needed to be refocused to provide resources.

**Dr. Lowery** said local agencies are building their own curriculum and noted that Maryland did not hit its stride until it received feedback from surveys. She said the state is currently sending teams to districts and that it could have been more deliberate from the beginning. She also recommended working side-by-side and sharing best practices.

**Dr. Atkinson** suggested showing the difference between old and new standards in easing the transition for teachers who can see where they've been and which strategies they need. She also recommended having master teachers who can be leaders when it comes to professional development and noted that states can start with a small group and expand. She said North Carolina has gotten valuable feedback from teachers and suggested working with the PTA or other parent groups.

**An audience member** asked if states have a plan if Common Core is removed via state legislation.

**Mr. Huffman** said the Tennessee senate education committee began its hearing by reading the Common Core, so that critics had to reference where in the text they found issues. He said that people expressed a deeper desire to have higher standards, which created ground for discussion of what could possibly replace the Common Core and if it would have the desired effects.

**Dr. Atkinson** noted that an introduced bill does not necessarily become legislation and said that people will recognize that the Common Core is not as negative as opponents say. She said the process may be challenging, but the minds that want to do the best will prevail. She also noted that standards are reviewed every five years and said she hopes legislatures will honor the cycle currently in place.

**Mr. Rotherham** asked about the role of the media.

**Mr. Huffman** says the media focuses on the easy story, especially when it involves party politics, which means it overlooks what goes on in the classroom and other less obvious stories, such as the shift in teacher union support.

**Dr. Lowery** said parents do not live in the political bubble and conversation about the Common Core confuses them. However, she said, parents generally trust teachers, most of whom are on board with the Common Core.

**Dr. Atkinson** said the media constantly covers the Common Core and noted the challenge with social media. She said Common Core proponents have lost ground by not utilizing social media to communicate with harder-to-reach audiences.

**Dr. Huffman** said the media has not been fact-checking.

**Ms. Skandera** recommended reporting on the whole narrative, which will show that there is positive work.