

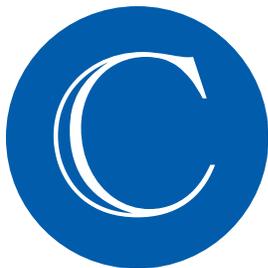
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## The Role of Strategic Communications in the Transition to New Academic Standards and Assessments:

### Case Studies of Tennessee and Kentucky

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*Charting an ambitious new course is inevitably challenging in any sector. Whether establishing a local business, pioneering a new technology, or turning around a failing company, transformational change requires careful strategy, clear communication, and plain hard work.*

*In American K-12 education, no single change in the last 10 years has been as ambitious as requiring that every student graduate prepared for college and career. Data show many students leaving American high schools are not, nor have been, truly prepared for life after graduating. In response, states established new, higher standards and are adopting assessments that measure those higher standards.*

*Just like any change, this has been hard - attended with implementation struggles, educator adjustments, and political wrangling. The two states considered here - Tennessee and Kentucky - are by no means immune to these challenges, neither in the recent past nor into the present; but their histories provide insight into what a well-organized communication and change management process has entailed in states with a clear vision and strong political leadership. The lessons from Tennessee and Kentucky can be instructive for other state leaders and policymakers as they too try to ensure all students are prepared for college and career.*

This case study examines how the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the state of Tennessee managed communications in the transition to more rigorous standards. Both states adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); Kentucky called them the *Kentucky Core Academic Standards* and Tennessee called them the *Tennessee Common Core*. Since their adoption, significant resources have been deployed to communicate about the transition and, more recently, to manage the grassroots and legislative efforts to roll back the adoption.

## Lessons Learned

From Kentucky and Tennessee

1. **Proactive Communication.** Proactive communication tailored to various audiences – particularly educators – builds widespread support which will be necessary when resistance emerges.
2. **Coordinated Communication.** Coordinated communication among the governor, the chief state school officer, general assembly, and other prominent stakeholders and messengers is essential.
3. **Educator Engagement.** Engaging and communicating directly with educators is a requirement when taking on major changes in schooling. Their support is essential.
4. **Simple Messages.** The development of a few simple messages with a focus on improving student outcomes helps to communicate successfully and avoid over-complication.
5. **Engaged Partners.** Engaging other organizations (e.g. businesses, non-profits) to assist with communications to various audiences is an effective way to ensure that all stakeholders get the information they need.
6. **Plan for the Inevitable.** Efforts to guide the conversation about inevitabilities that could be viewed negatively (such as lower test scores) is an effective communication strategy; implementation will raise new communication challenges that are not always anticipated in policy making.
7. **Students, Education and the Economy.** Tying education reform efforts to improved outcomes for students and the economic growth of a state motivates the business community to support changes.
8. **Meeting with Stakeholders and Listening.** State listening tours, town halls, and small meetings with stakeholders help build trust and give attendees the opportunity to voice their points of view. Governors and chief state school officers can learn from stakeholders and carry what they have learned to the larger public to make the case for taking action.

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## THE CONTEXT IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee's transition story begins before the state officially adopted the Tennessee Common Core. In January 2008, Tennessee adopted the Tennessee Diploma Project Standards (TDPS). The TDPS were adopted after work with [Achieve's American Diploma Project \(ADP\)](#), a national effort to help states and school districts align high school standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability systems with college and career readiness. The TDPS was a response to a [2007 U.S. Chamber of Commerce report card](#), which gave Tennessee an "F" for its inadequate "truth-in-advertising." At the time, the proficiency cut scores for Tennessee assessments **had been set significantly lower than proficiency cut scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)**, a test given to a nationally representative sample and often considered the "nation's report card." The report concluded Tennessee had ["systematically painted a rosier picture of how their schools are doing than is actually the case."](#)<sup>1</sup>

## BUILDING SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

With the sobering assessment from the report card in mind, Gov. Phil Bredesen (2003 – 2011) began a campaign to build support for the transition to more rigorous standards. A public relations and communications firm in Nashville was hired to assist with **developing common messages and communications materials that could be used with a variety of stakeholders**. The firm helped the governor's office staff develop the story explaining why the previous state standards were not serving the needs of the students of Tennessee, and how higher standards would help students gain meaningful employment and go to college prepared to do college-level work. Two key messages guided the communications effort for TDPS: **1) Students must be held to high expectations and 2) the state must practice "truth-in-advertising."**

The idea of "truth-in-advertising" was used to communicate that more rigorous standards would initially result in lower student scores on assessments. Gov. Bredesen, his staff, and Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) officials emphasized to parents and the community that lower scores did not mean students were learning less or not capable, **but simply that more was expected of them**. Publications, a presentation for the governor's staff and a website were developed to support the transition.

The *Tennessee Diploma Project Council*, consisting of members from the TDOE and the business community, was created to support the state's transition to the TDPS and assist with communications about the effort. The governor attended their meetings; the council also developed publications that spoke to the urgent need to implement more rigorous academic standards and assessments.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.uschamber.com/report-card-2007-major-findings>.

The governor's education policy advisor traveled around the state with the TDOE's associate commissioner to meet with district superintendents and school principals. Their goal was to continue building a case for the transition and to keep these key stakeholders informed about the pace of the transition and their role in it.

The [State Collaborative on Reforming Education \(SCORE\)](#)<sup>2</sup> also played a role in communicating about the new standards and assessments.

Founded by Sen. Bill Frist, former governor of Tennessee, SCORE is a collaborative group of leaders in the education, business, nonprofit, and government sectors. The organization supports state-based efforts to prepare students for college and the workforce. SCORE took on the task of communicating the changes to parents and created parent-centered print materials. They ran pieces in newspapers throughout the state, produced and funded public service announcements, and used local businesses to secure media opportunities to discuss how the transition to the new standards would support the economic growth of the state. In preparation for the administration of new assessments in 2009-2010, SCORE focused communications efforts on how parents could help their children prepare for the assessments.

While these external partners were essential, Gov. Bredesen's role was vital to communicating about the transition. He traveled the state and met with business and postsecondary leaders, both to inform them about the transition and to gather feedback on what they needed out of the K-12 education system. He went to nearly every part of the state and used the information he collected to further refine his message. Essentially, the resulting message was that the higher standards would better prepare students to attend Tennessee institutions of higher education and eventually to work in Tennessee. He made an important connection clear: **The quality of the state's K-12 system was closely intertwined with its economic growth.** He personalized his remarks by highlighting how previously a high school education was sufficient for people to live well and to raise a family; however, in the current economy, such a low bar for academic performance would no longer prepare students to succeed. He highlighted the transition in his state-of-the-state address as well.

## PROGRESS AND SCORE DECLINES

After the TDPS were first implemented in 2008-2009, NAEP scores improved. [From the 2007 administration to the 2009 administration, grade 8 reading scores increased from 259 to 261, and grade 8 math scores went from 274 to 275. Additional gains have continued.](#) Tennessee students' progress from 2011 - 2013 made them the [fastest improving state in the nation](#).<sup>3</sup>

However, while NAEP scores increased, scores on the TDPS-aligned assessments declined as predicted. **In 2009, 90 percent of 8<sup>th</sup>-graders in Tennessee were proficient on state assessments; in 2010, proficiency dropped to 25 percent.** While this decline in proficiency scores was significant, public reception of the decline was unremarkable because of the efforts undertaken by Gov. Bredesen's office to communicate the rationale for raising the rigor of [Tennessee's standards and the inevitability of lower scores upon the first administration of new assessments](#).

### Governance in Tennessee

*In Tennessee, the governor appoints the commissioner of education, as well as the members of the state board of education. Governance models vary and gubernatorial appointment of the chief state school officer occurs only in 11 states.*

<sup>2</sup> For more information on SCORE, see: <http://tnscore.org/about/>.

<sup>3</sup> Grade 8 math scores in 2011 were 274 and in 2013, 278. Grade 8 reading scores in 2011 were 259 and in 2013, 265.

## GUBERNATORIAL TRANSITION

Gov. Bredesen was term-limited at the end of 2010. After watching reforms he put in place as mayor of Nashville dismantled, Bredesen wanted to ensure that the reforms he began as governor would not only be supported by his successor, but built upon. In 2010, with a gubernatorial election looming, **Bredesen took the highly regarded and unprecedented step of reaching out to candidates for governor from both parties to get their support for the state’s education agenda.** He updated the candidates regularly and when the state submitted its federal *Race to the Top* application, the gubernatorial candidates signed letters pledging their support for the plan outlined in the application.

## TRANSITION TO THE COMMON CORE IN TENNESSEE

In the summer of 2010, just before Gov. Bredesen left office, Tennessee adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).<sup>4</sup> Forty-six states adopted the CCSS, and the standards had been supported as a significant step toward making U.S. students internationally competitive – something governors from both parties and state superintendents in all parts of the country indicated that they wanted. [The development of the standards was a bipartisan effort initiated by state governors.](#)

Gov. Bredesen’s office staff described the adoption of the Tennessee Common Core as “a natural evolution.” There had been widespread support for TDPS among all stakeholders. Tennessee Common Core adoption was seen as a next step to increase the rigor of the state’s standards and to build upon efforts to improve the state’s K-12 system. When the state took on the task of adopting and implementing the TDPS, there was no resistance to the transition. TDPS was seen as a “home-grown,” Tennessee-led effort. Because the TDPS transition had been well received, Gov. Bredesen and his staff had not anticipated the national pushback to CCSS that eventually emerged.

Pushback to the Tennessee Common Core did occur, reaching its height during the first term of Bredesen’s successor, Governor Bill Haslam. Initial resistance to the Tennessee Common Core was a national movement that eventually gained traction in Tennessee. When the Tennessee Common Core were adopted in the summer of 2010, there was virtually no resistance, either in the state or nationally. In some respects, Gov. Haslam’s staff was caught off guard by the pushback to the Tennessee Common Core because there had been widespread support when the case was made for TDPS. Haslam’s staff – as did Bredesen’s – expected that the transition to Tennessee Common Core would be similarly supported. Additionally, there seemed to be less urgency to proactively communicate information regarding the Tennessee Common Core because the transition would occur over a longer period of time (compared to the expedited timeline associated with TDPS) and the corresponding assessments would not be phased in for four years.

Once pushback took hold in Tennessee, Gov. Haslam’s staff quickly developed a strategy for addressing the need to communicate to a wide variety of stakeholders about the Tennessee Common Core, and [a website to centralize the communications with educators about the Tennessee Common Core.](#)

In summer 2014, Gov. Haslam responded to criticism from teachers that they were not being included in decisions made about Tennessee Common Core implementation. **He decided to tour the state of Tennessee with the commissioner of education.** Together, they went to 12 cities and met with educators and district superintendents. In his meetings with educators, Gov. Haslam wanted to know what they thought of the transition to Tennessee Common Core and how each of their schools handled the transition. A frequent

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response was that educators were frustrated with the misalignment between the Tennessee Common Core and the end-of-the-year assessment, which had defaulted to the old assessment when the legislature pulled Tennessee out of the PARCC consortium.

As a result of the summer meetings, Gov. Haslam **committed to meeting regularly with teachers. Prior to the beginning of school, Haslam wrote a letter to teachers thanking them for their work and acknowledging their frustrations. He reported on his findings from the summer meetings and committed to including them in conversations that impacted educators.** In fall 2014, as a follow up to the summer meetings, Gov. Haslam led an education summit designed to listen to a broad array of stakeholders concerning the challenges facing contemporary education and to reflect on the state's recent progress. The [summit](#) included educators, administrators, elected officials, business leaders, higher education representatives, and members of advocacy groups. It was widely attended and prepared Gov. Haslam to consider other ways to engage with educators in the future, something he is committed to doing in his second term and will accomplish, in part, with his newly-established Governor's Teacher Cabinet.

As a further step to engage educators and the public in maintaining high standards for students in Tennessee, Gov. Haslam announced the creation of a standards review website in October 2014. The website was designed to gather public input on what students must know and be able to do in English language arts and mathematics. The governor laid out a process for the formal review, involving teams of teachers from across the state in analyzing the feedback and then making recommendations for additions or updates to the standards. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the State Board of Education (SBOE), will compile all of the feedback data and provide the teams with a report to inform the review of the standards. The teams will begin their work in the summer of 2015.

## Tennessee in Strategies Brief

- Secured long-term political support for education policies and higher standards.
- Led by active, supportive governors and stakeholder groups.
- Met face-to-face, listened and responded to feedback.



## THE CONTEXT IN KENTUCKY

In deciding *Rose v. Council* (1989), the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that the Kentucky General Assembly had failed to establish an efficient system of common schools, and as such, the schools in Kentucky were unconstitutional. The ruling emphasized that the Kentucky General Assembly had the sole responsibility for providing the system of schools in the Commonwealth. The court further ruled that Kentucky could not abdicate its responsibility to provide an adequate public education in the name of local control. As a result, the *Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA, House Bill 940)* was passed in 1990.

KERA established a new system of financing schools that aimed to create consistency in how education was funded at the state and local level. The new system was named [Support Educational Excellence in Kentucky \(SEEK\)](#). The Kentucky legislature has changed some aspect of the act in almost every legislative session since the passage of KERA. In 2009, [Senate Bill 1](#) was introduced as an effort to overhaul KERA. *Senate Bill 1* stipulated (in part) that:

- The state adopt new K-12 standards based on national and international benchmarks;
- The state overhaul its accountability and assessment systems; and
- Higher education and K-12 leaders work collaboratively to lower remediation rates for college students.

*Senate Bill 1* passed both houses of the legislature without opposition and was signed into law on March 26, 2009.

## CO-CREATED AND COORDINATED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Dr. Terry Holliday, the commissioner of education, led the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) as it began a communications campaign within weeks of Gov. Beshear's signing of *Senate Bill 1*. Both the governor and commissioner wanted to ensure that communications about the bill were consistent. There was also a feeling that the bill was so expansive in its scope that early communication efforts would be necessary to garner public support. In response to this, **communications from Commissioner Holliday at the KDE and the governor's office were consistent and aligned. Communications consisted of the following:**

- A web page focused on all of the actions taken in compliance with *Senate Bill 1*;
- Presentations to educators and school district leaders around the state;
- Articles featured in an existing KDE publication, known as *Kentucky Teacher*;

- Webcasts for teachers and school administrators that allowed KDE to collect feedback from webcast participants;
- Email messages to parents, teachers, legislators, and media representatives that provided updates on the work of those engaged in implementing the tenets of *Senate Bill 1*;
- Blog posts; and
- Discussions at the Kentucky Board of Education meetings.

*Senate Bill 1* required the state to adopt college and career ready standards that were internationally benchmarked. In 2009, at the time of the signing of the bill, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) had begun the process of working with a group of writers to draft a set of learning standards for language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. In 2008, a group of governors had called for the development of more rigorous academic standards that could be internationally benchmarked, and Gov. Beshear signed on to effort because of its alignment with the state's goals.

**CCSS met the requirement in *Senate Bill 1* that Kentucky adopt internationally benchmarked, college and career ready standards. The Kentucky State Board of Education adopted the CCSS in February 2010 and was the first state to do so.** Commissioner Holliday and the KDE had been deliberate about monitoring the development of the CCSS, [providing feedback along the way and keeping the general assembly informed of its progress.](#)<sup>4</sup>

After adoption, the state renamed the CCSS the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. While the state board of education was officially responsible for adopting the CCSS, **Governor Beshear frequently and consistently voiced his endorsement of the standards prior to and after adoption.** About the CCSS, Beshear says: “*It was a defining step in our ongoing effort...to build a world-class education system.*”<sup>5</sup>

After adoption, Commissioner Holliday spearheaded the effort to implement the standards in schools around the state. The KDE instituted a Leadership Network structure to build local capacity for requirements in *Senate Bill 1*. Focused on the implementation of the standards, these networks served to engage educators and get their support. Commissioner Holliday [identified early on how important it was that educators were driving the reforms.](#)<sup>4</sup>

Gov. Beshear worked with Commissioner Holliday and the state board of education to focus on bringing the business community into communication efforts around support for the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. As part of that effort, Commissioner Holliday and Kentucky Chamber of Commerce President Dave Adkisson spent the summer of 2012 visiting the state's local chambers to discuss the adoption of the standards and to emphasize the need to prepare students for college or career.

To further demonstrate his support for education reforms underway in Kentucky, **Gov. Beshear embarked on a 10-city town hall meeting tour across the Commonwealth. The tour was billed as an opportunity for the public to weigh in on education reform issues.** By all accounts, the town hall meetings were well attended and

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<sup>4</sup> Tucker, Mark (2014, Oct 14). Kentucky and the Common Core: Interview With Terry Holliday and Felicia Smith. Available at [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top\\_performers/2014/10/kentucky\\_and\\_the\\_common\\_core\\_interview\\_with\\_terry\\_holliday\\_and\\_felicia\\_smith.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2014/10/kentucky_and_the_common_core_interview_with_terry_holliday_and_felicia_smith.html)

<sup>5</sup> See: [http://www.wkyt.com/wymt/home/headlines/Governor\\_Beshear\\_touts\\_common\\_core\\_standards\\_in\\_education\\_140788283.html](http://www.wkyt.com/wymt/home/headlines/Governor_Beshear_touts_common_core_standards_in_education_140788283.html)

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focused on giving those in attendance a chance to provide insight into what was needed to better prepare students for college and the workplace. Gov. Beshear used the town hall meetings to explain why he thought Kentucky's work to reform education was a step in the right direction and why the work would pay off in terms of improving the state's long-term economic well-being.

## MANAGING PUSHBACK

Since adoption, Gov. Beshear and Commissioner Holliday have consistently reiterated that Kentucky was the first to adopt the CCSS and they continue to support the CCSS, in spite of state-based and national opposition to their implementation. Efforts in Kentucky to “un-adopt” have been unsuccessful: [House Bill 215 never made it out of legislative committee](#); [the bill](#) would have prohibited implementation of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. It would have also required the state board of education to recommend new standards for state implementation. The Kentucky State Board of Education [released a statement](#) reaffirming their support of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards after the bill failed.

Pushback against the adoption of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards has not made headway in part because of the support the standards have from Kentucky teachers. [Well-prepared and resourced](#), teachers in Kentucky support the implementation of the standards and have been vocal about their support. When *House Bill 215* was debated in committee, Kentucky teachers appeared at the hearing to voice their support. Additionally, the support of the long-standing [Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence](#), a nonpartisan, nonprofit comprised of Kentucky stakeholders focused on education, helped build momentum for higher standards and respond to pushback. Finally, because the *Senate Bill 1* came directly from the general assembly before much of the pushback began, they have been steadfast in defending raised standards even in the face of challenges.

Consistent with Gov. Beshear's endorsement of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards and his strong alliance and partnership with Commissioner Holliday, an [op-ed co-written by them both](#) was published in the fall of 2013 **expressing support for the standards and citing evidence that the Commonwealth's early adoption was already making an impact in terms of improving student outcomes.**

## PRACTICE TESTING AND GETTING BUY-IN

In the spring of 2012, Kentucky administered a practice assessment to students aligned to the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. The Kentucky Performance Rating of Education Progress (K-Prep) [results were released in November 2012](#) and, as expected, proficiency scores dropped. [KDE released embargoed data](#) to the media, three days before the full release on November 2, 2012. Drops in proficiency scores are commonplace when students transition to new standards and new assessments; however, such decreases may cause significant political turmoil if broad-scale support for the reforms associated with new assessments has not been secured.

**Gov. Beshear and Commissioner Holliday used common messages when talking about the expected drop in proficiency.** Advisors to Beshear felt that consistency between the messages that he delivered and those delivered by KDE and Holliday was essential. While the primary responsibility of communicating the score drop belonged to Commissioner Holliday, both Commissioner Holliday and Gov. Beshear communicated the expected decline in proficiency scores **before the scores were made available to the public.**

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As a means to fully prepare, [Kentucky leaders took the extra step of participating in a research study designed to predict](#) how much the proficiency scores would decrease. Once the data were released, Commissioner [Holliday was able to tell the press](#) that while scores did indeed drop, Kentucky students had actually exceeded expectations given the predicted decline.

The governor knew it was important to work with higher education and the business community to earn their support of the new standards. In doing so, he potentially insulated himself and the reforms from criticism once the lower scores were reported. The business community was engaged in communicating about the new standards. For example, the state [chamber of commerce worked to educate businesses and parents](#) about the new standards and what they meant for the state.

Ultimately, the new scores were a measure of students' proficiency on a set of standards that had widespread support, particularly from the business community, and lower scores signaled that the standards were, in fact, just what Beshear and Holliday had presented them as – more rigorous. **Lower test scores were largely met with understanding and positive reception because they were expected, and stakeholders knew plans were underway to improve them over time.**

## Kentucky in Strategies Brief

- Driven by state legislation and the Kentucky General Assembly.
- Led by the governor and a proactive commissioner of education.
- Engaged educators regularly and attended to implementation.

## CLOSER LOOK: PRIORITIZATION OF STANDARDS AND EDUCATOR EVALUATION REFORMS

At any given time, states have many education reforms happening at once. Educator evaluation, standards, assessment, accountability, classroom technology, school choice, and funding – to name a few – are all undergoing changes in many states. And states are not the only actors. At the local level, new programs are implemented by districts. At the federal level, programs and policies are updated. Predictably, these reforms will affect each other. **No individual policy shift can be seen as separate from the larger ecosystem of policy changes, nor is it safe to assume that districts and schools can take on a limitless number of changes without some collateral damage. States must prioritize policy changes.**

### Standards and Educator Evaluation in Kentucky and Tennessee

Nationally, the interplay between two reforms – adopting college and career ready standards and reforming the way educators are evaluated – is relevant to policymakers. Kentucky and Tennessee provide informatively contrasting approaches. Kentucky led with standards; Tennessee pursued standards and teacher evaluation together.

Tennessee's approach of taking on both simultaneously was ambitious, and arguably, its priorities reflected the research – particularly the finding that teachers are the single greatest in-school factor influencing student achievement.<sup>8</sup> Tennessee conducted extensive training for educators on the new standards, while also implementing a new educator evaluation system that included measures of student growth and providing training on the new evaluation system. As a result of the ambitious implementation timeline, high quality of training and recent NAEP results, the state is seen as a nationwide leader in reform.

However, the highly regarded professional development and general support for raised standards from educators and policymakers were not able to insulate the state from the challenges of pursuing two ambitious reforms together. Many educators, supportive of the move to raise student expectations, felt uncertain when faced with the prospect of teacher evaluations based on new tests aligned to the standards while still relatively early in their implementation. This, in part, contributed to some challenges to Tennessee's standards implementation, including moving away from the planned administration of the PARCC assessment in 2014-2015.

Many states pursuing standards and evaluation reform concurrently have chosen to delay the consequences of teacher evaluation, making their approach similar to Kentucky's. The rationale on the part of many of those states is that raising standards requires something new of teachers and they will need time to deeply understand the standards and put them into practice in their classroom before being held to high stakes in evaluation. Kentucky, who moved faster than any other state in adopting and implementing standards, has seen little successful pushback on the standards, while, as articulated by Commissioner Holliday, deliberately moving slowly on teacher evaluation tied to student growth results.

### Consideration for Policymakers in Implementing Multiple Large-Scale Changes

- **Understand the full range of reforms.** Understand the full range of reforms that are being implemented in the state's education system, including local and federal changes and reforms coming from different state actors (governor, general assembly, state board of education and department of education) and recognize their interdependencies.
- **Balance ambition and priorities.** Given the urgency of improving outcomes for all students, state policymakers will want to establish ambitious agendas for improvement. These agendas should attempt to balance carefully setting goals that are both ambitious and also operationally and politically achievable.

<sup>8</sup> Rockoff, Jonah. (2004). *The Impact of Individual Teachers on Student Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data*. *American Economic Review* 94(2):247-252; Rivkin, Steven, Eric Hanushek, and Thomas Kane. (2005). *Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement*. *Econometrica*. 73(2): 417-458



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