



# U.S. Teachers' Support of Their State Standards and Assessments

## Findings from the American Teacher Panel

*Julia H. Kaufman, Elaine Lin Wang, Laura S. Hamilton, Lindsey E. Thompson, Gerald Paul Hunter*

### Key findings

- Nearly all teachers supported use of state standards for instruction, but only a little more than one-third supported use of current statewide tests to measure student mastery of standards.
- Teachers with more low-income students were more likely to support both English language arts and math state standards.
- Teachers who thought their state standards were Common Core were less supportive of using statewide assessments to measure mastery of standards.
- Most teachers felt that state standards prepared students for college and the workforce, but majorities also felt that standards excluded important concepts and were not appropriate for special needs students.

**SUMMARY** ■ Amid questions about the future of state standards and assessments, this report provides a critical perspective for district and state policymakers to consider: U.S. teachers' perceptions of and support for current standards and assessment. Our nationally representative data suggest that nearly all U.S. mathematics and English language arts teachers support use of state standards in instruction. However, the majority of teachers do not support use of current state tests to measure mastery of standards. This report explores key factors that may be related to teachers' support—or lack of support—for their current standards and assessments. Among the concerns voiced by majorities of teachers are the difficulty of current state standards and tests and their appropriateness for students with special learning needs. These findings are drawn from a February 2016 survey of the American Teacher Panel, a nationally representative sample of K–12 teachers across the United States. The findings presented in this report have implications for how states and districts can support implementation of state standards and assessments to ensure that U.S. students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.

## INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Common Core State Standards was a bipartisan attempt among chief state school officers and governors to challenge all K–12 students with the same rigorous, high standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Starting in 2011, 43 states plus the District of Columbia voluntarily adopted the Common Core or similar standards. These states also revised their state assessment systems or adopted new assessments that were designed to accurately measure student progress toward their new standards. A majority of states joined one of the multistate consortia awarded federal funds to develop assessments aligned with new standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). A few states opted to administer other assessments.<sup>1</sup>

Just a few years into the reform efforts, however, many state and local leaders, educators, and other members of the public expressed concerns about what they perceived to be federal intrusion into local decisions about what students should learn, despite Common Core not being a federal initiative.<sup>2</sup> Following public outcry, several states undertook processes to revise—and sometimes rename—their standards, and some are undertaking standards revision processes currently.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, state assessments have piqued the concern of educators and the public, not only because of perceived federal overreach into what students should learn, but also because of the amount of required student testing and the high stakes that many states have attached to assessment outcomes.<sup>4</sup> In particular, many states require students' achievement on state ELA and math-

ematics tests to be factored into the evaluation of teachers and school leaders.

The introduction of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015—the newest iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—brought the opportunity for states and local school districts to formally and systematically reconsider their standards and assessment systems. ESSA reinforces the need for strong, rigorous standards to guide instruction and learning, clarifying that the choice of standards to adopt is in the states' purview. ESSA also continues ESEA mandates requiring states to administer standardized tests in reading and mathematics and publicly report on the test scores for whole schools and certain subgroups of students, including English language learners (ELLs) and low-income students. However, the law eliminates the requirement that teachers be evaluated through student outcomes and allows some flexibility for states to choose the indicators to use to measure students' progress.

In March 2017, the U.S. Congress repealed the regulations intended to guide state plans for implementing ESSA. Since then, the Department of Education has provided states with a new “streamlined template” that—according to Secretary Betsy DeVos—gives states “the freedom and flexibility they deserve.”<sup>5</sup> The implication is that states may have much more leeway to exercise judgment about the policies that will best support teaching and learning, which may result in considerable variation across the country in state policy decisions, including decisions related to academic learning standards and assessments.

Amid questions about the future of state standards and aligned assessments across the United States, one important source of information states and school districts should con-

Teachers ultimately implement state standards, making interpretations and exercising discretion in the course of doing so. Teachers' responses to state standards and assessments are therefore critical for understanding how these policies are translated into practice, and for considering how policies affect the education system as a whole.

sider as they make critical decisions is the individuals who do the daily work of helping students meet challenging standards: teachers. Teachers ultimately implement state standards, making interpretations and exercising discretion in the course of doing so.<sup>6</sup> Teachers' responses to state standards and assessments are therefore critical for understanding how these policies are translated into practice, and for considering how policies affect the education system as a whole.

## The Purpose of This Report

In this report, we “take the temperature” of U.S. teachers' perceptions about their existing state standards and assessments. Specifically, we examine the following research questions:

- What percentages of teachers reported supporting their state standards and aligned assessments?
- What factors were related to teachers' support for their state standards and assessments?
- Have teachers' concerns about their state assessments changed over time?

Teachers' perceptions about their state's current standards and assessments provide a window into how these standards are being implemented in schools. Research suggests that teachers' understanding and support or rejection of particular policies are tied to how faithfully and thoughtfully they implement those policies in their classroom.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, insights into teachers' reasons for supporting or rejecting policies on standards and assessments could help shape the content, form, and communication of future policy in ways that better support standards implementation. Such information could also be helpful to district and school leaders as they design professional learning opportunities for teachers to support standards implementation.

## Data and Methods

Our data consist of survey responses from a nationally representative sample of teachers from the American Teacher Panel about state standards and assessments fielded in February 2016, just after ESSA had been passed. The American Teacher Panel is a randomly selected, nationally representative panel of American K–12 public school teachers. Teachers who have agreed to participate in the panel receive 2–4 web-based surveys each year regarding questions related to education policy, teaching, and learning. Given the longitudinal nature of the panel, teachers' survey responses can be explored at one time point or over time.

To ensure representativeness, panel members were originally sampled randomly from across the nation. The sample includes full-time public school teachers in grades K–12 in all subjects, including teachers of special education students and ELLs. The response rate for the February 2016 survey on which most of this report is based was 45 percent ( $n = 1,321$ ), and the maximum margin of error for overall responses was 4.0 percent. In this report, we also compare February 2016 responses with similar items in the February 2015 survey for the same teachers who responded to both surveys.<sup>8</sup> The response rate for the February 2015 survey was 58 percent ( $n = 659$ ), and the maximum margin of error was 4.6 percent. American Teacher Panel response rates are similar to those of other national surveys,<sup>9</sup> but nonresponse could lead to some bias in our estimates. To address this potential bias, the weighted estimates provided in this report are based on a model for nonresponse that gives more weight to teachers in subgroups with lower response rates to our survey.<sup>10</sup>

In the February 2016 survey, we asked teachers questions about their support of their state standards and assessments, as well as their perceptions and concerns about specific issues related to standards and assessments. In this report, we focus on survey responses of mathematics and ELA teachers<sup>11</sup> in regard to, respectively, their mathematics and ELA state standards and assessments. We also examine how perceptions of standards and assessments relate to teachers' background and school context. Knowing whether teachers' perceptions and support of standards and assessments vary according to teacher characteristics and school demographics could help determine where more support for understanding or implementing state policies might be needed. Specifically, we examined the extent to which some teacher-level and school-level demographic factors could be related to teachers' support for their state standards and assessments, including

- teachers in the top quartile in terms of percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) at the school where they teach, compared with teachers in the bottom three quartiles in terms of percentage FRL at the school where they teach
- teachers in the top quartile in terms of the percentage of ELLs in the classes they teach, compared with those in the bottom three quartiles
- teachers in the top quartile in terms of the percentage of students with an individualized education plan (IEP) in the classes they teach, compared with those in the bottom three quartiles

- teachers serving students in elementary grades (K–5) compared with those serving middle or secondary grade (6–12) students
- years of teaching experience.

Throughout this report, we refer to teachers in the top quartile in terms of FRL as those in “lower-income schools” (compared with those in “higher-income schools,” who are in the bottom three quartiles). Similarly, we refer to teachers in the top quartile in terms of percentage ELL and IEP students as those with “higher percentages” of ELL and IEP students (compared with those in the bottom three quartiles with “lower percentages” of ELL and IEP students). The percentage of ELL and IEP students in teachers’ classes—as well as their status as an elementary or secondary teacher and their years of teaching experience—was based on teachers’ self-reports. Data regarding FRL were based on data from the National Center of Education Statistics Common Core of Data. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics for teachers who responded to the February 2016 survey.

In addition to comparing teachers’ responses based on these background variables, we examined two variables related to teachers’ state policy context. First, when examining teachers’ support for their state’s current assessments, we took into account which statewide assessments were administered in each teachers’ state in 2015–2016, with the rationale that the state test itself may be connected with teachers’ support for assessments more generally.<sup>12</sup> Second, for teachers’ support of both their standards and assessments, we considered teachers’ perceptions regarding which standards their state had adopted. Teachers’ perceptions about the standards in their state were based on two survey questions: “Which academic standards has

your state adopted for mathematics?” and “Which academic standards has your state adopted for English language arts and literacy?” The possible responses from which teachers could choose in answer to these questions were Common Core State Standards; standards adapted from Common Core; standards not adapted from Common Core; or I don’t know.

Which standards have been adopted in a particular state is not a simple question. While 42 states were on record as having formally adopted the Common Core when this survey was administered,<sup>13</sup> many states call their standards by a different name than the “Common Core State Standards,” and many states have additional standards alongside the Common Core or have revised the language of the standards as written in the Common Core. That said, teachers’ support for their standards could be influenced by whether they think they are in a state that has adopted the Common Core, especially given opposition to the Common Core in recent years.

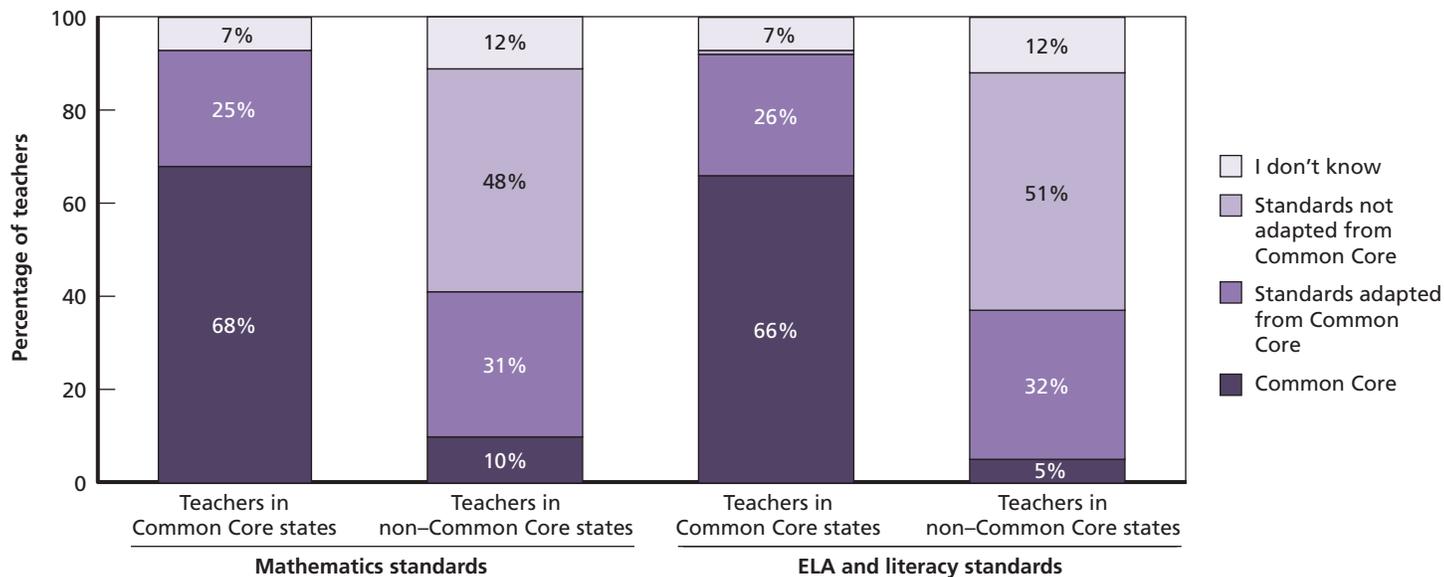
As seen in Figure 1, over 90 percent of the teachers in the states that were on record as adopting the Common Core indicated that their state had adopted Common Core or standards adapted from Common Core. Interestingly, between 30 and 40 percent of teachers in the eight states that had not adopted Common Core when this survey was administered also thought that their standards were Common Core or adapted from the Common Core. Those teachers’ perceptions might be accurate, given that some states that have not formally adopted the Common Core have many standards that are similar to the Common Core.<sup>14</sup> These data therefore suggest that teachers in Common Core states generally knew that their standards were similar to Common Core. However, there was some disagreement among teachers in those eight non-Common Core states on the similarities between their standards and Common Core. In this report, we refer to teachers who indicated their state had adopted Common Core or similar standards as “Common Core teachers” and to those who indicated their state had not adopted Common Core or similar standards as “Non-Common Core teachers.”

In the remainder of this report, we highlight differences in teachers’ perceptions of and support for standards and assessments among subgroups of teachers—including which standards teachers thought their state had adopted—only when the differences were significant (i.e., have a *p*-value of 0.05 or smaller in statistical comparisons and are thus unlikely to have occurred by chance).<sup>15</sup> We also consider the key factors influencing teachers’ support of standards and assessments in logistic regressions, where independent variables include the demographic and state policy context variables already discussed.

**Table 1. Demographics of survey respondents for February 2016 survey (N = 1,321)**

Subgroup	Mean
Elementary (K–5) teachers	49.3%
Secondary (6–12) teachers	48.9%
Math teachers	54.7%
English language arts teachers	62.2%
Percentage of students in the school receiving FRL	51.6%
Percentage of a teacher’s students who are ELL	15.6%
Percentage of a teacher’s students who have IEPs	22.1%
Years of teaching experience	15.2

**Figure 1. Teachers' perceptions regarding which standards their state had adopted**



In the findings that follow, we begin by discussing teachers' support of their state's standards and assessments. Then we explore how teachers' perceptions about specific issues related to their state's standards and assessments might offer potential explanations for their level of support. We also examine differences in teachers' perceptions about state assessments from 2015 to 2016. Finally, we consider the implications of the findings for states and school districts.

## FINDINGS

### Among U.S. teachers, what percentages reported supporting state standards and assessments?

We asked teachers to indicate their agreement with the statements, "I support the use of the state [mathematics/ELA] standards in classroom instruction," and "I support use of the current statewide tests to measure student mastery of state

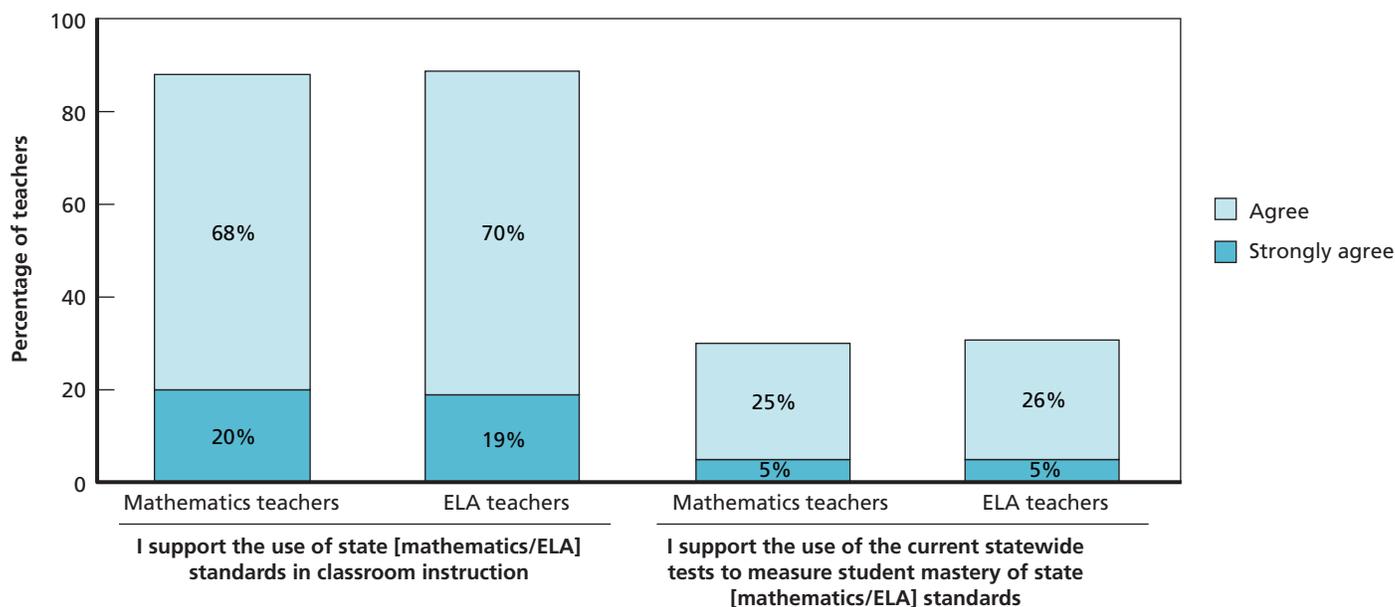
[mathematics/ELA] standards." Mathematics teachers were asked about their support for mathematics standards and assessments, and ELA teachers were asked about their support for ELA standards and assessments.<sup>16</sup> Teachers could indicate their agreement on a four-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." For our analysis, we regarded a response of "strongly agree" or "agree" to these items as indicative of teachers' "support" for standards or assessments. This section focuses on overall responses to these items for all teachers, as well as responses for particular subgroups (e.g., elementary compared with secondary teachers, or those in schools serving higher compared with lower percentages of FRL students).

*Nearly all teachers supported use of state standards for instruction, while only a little more than one-third supported use of current statewide tests to measure student mastery of standards.*

A large majority of teachers in the study sample reported supporting the use of state standards in instruction. As Figure 2

A large majority of teachers in the study sample reported supporting the use of state standards in instruction.

**Figure 2. Percentages of mathematics and ELA teachers who agreed with statements about standards and assessments**



NOTE: The percentages of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement regarding support for their standards were significantly higher than the percentages who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement regarding support for their tests.

shows, among ELA teachers 89 percent agreed they “support the use of the state ELA standards in classroom instruction.” Similarly, 88 percent of mathematics teachers agreed with that statement in regard to the state mathematics standards. *Among the same teachers, however, support for the current state assessments was almost 60 percentage points lower.* Only 31 percent of ELA teachers and 29 percent of mathematics teachers supported the use of current statewide assessments to measure student mastery of state standards.

Nearly all teachers (98 percent of mathematics teachers and 99 percent of ELA teachers) who supported use of current statewide tests also reported supporting their standards. Thus, teachers who supported use of statewide tests almost always supported use of standards in instruction. However, teachers who supported use of standards certainly did not always support use of statewide tests. Only 34 percent of those who indicated that they supported use of mathematics standards in instruction also reported supporting use of statewide tests to measure mastery of mathematics standards. Similarly, only 35 percent of those who indicated supporting use of ELA standards in instruction reported supporting use of statewide tests to measure mastery of ELA standards.

### ***Teachers in schools with more lower-income students were more likely to support the use of state ELA and mathematics standards in instruction.***

As reported above, standards had wide support among teachers we surveyed. This finding held for all subgroups we examined (Table 2). That said, support for standards was significantly higher in certain subgroups than in others. To investigate the key factors that predicted support for standards, we performed logistic regressions where the outcome was agreement with the statement, “I support the use of the state [mathematics/ELA] standards in classroom instruction.” These regressions indicated that those in schools serving more low-income students (those receiving FRL) were more likely to support their standards for both mathematics and ELA. Otherwise, factors predicting teachers’ support of their standards appeared to vary depending on whether teachers were being asked about mathematics or ELA standards. Specifically, in the regressions, mathematics teachers in Common Core states were less likely to support their mathematics standards, but we did not see these differences among ELA teachers responding about their ELA standards. Lastly, elementary teachers were significantly less likely to support use of ELA standards in instruction compared with secondary teachers. For regression results, see Appendix A, Table A1.

**Table 2. Percentages of teachers in particular subgroups supporting use of mathematics and ELA standards in instruction**

<b>Subgroup</b>	<b>Mathematics Teachers Supporting Use of Mathematics Standards in Instruction</b>	<b>ELA Teachers Supporting Use of ELA Standards in Instruction</b>
Teachers in lower-income schools	93%***	95%**
Teachers in higher-income schools	86%	86%
Teachers with higher percentages of ELL students	90%	95%**
Teachers with lower percentages of ELL students	87%	86%
Teachers with higher percentages of students with IEPs	84%	88%
Teachers with lower percentages of students with IEPs	90%	89%
Elementary (K–5) teacher	86%	86%***
Secondary (6–12) teacher	92%	94%
Teachers who thought their standards were Common Core	86%*	88%
Teachers who thought their standards were adapted from Common Core	89%	87%
Teachers who thought their standards were not adapted from Common Core	94%	98%

NOTE: Asterisks indicate that a teacher in a given subgroup has significantly higher or lower odds of supporting standards, based on logistic regressions including all of the above variables as independent variables and the outcome as teachers' agreement that they support use of their state standards for math or ELA in instruction. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$

**Table 3. Percentages of teachers in particular subgroups supporting use of mathematics and ELA state tests to measure student mastery of standards**

<b>Subgroup</b>	<b>Mathematics Teachers Supporting Use of Current State Tests to Measure Student Mastery of Mathematics Standards</b>	<b>ELA Teachers Supporting Use of Current State Tests to Measure Student Mastery of ELA Standards</b>
Teachers in states with the PARCC assessment	25%	22%
Teachers in states with the SBAC assessment	26%	34%
Teachers in states not using the PARCC or SBAC assessment	32%	33%
Teachers in lower-income schools	29%	34%**
Teachers in higher-income schools	30%	30%
Teachers with higher percentages of ELL students	38%***	34%
Teachers with lower percentages of ELL students	26%	29%
Teachers with higher percentages of students with IEPs	22%**	28%
Teachers with lower percentages of students with IEPs	33%	32%
Elementary (K–5) teachers	27%	27%
Secondary (6–12) teachers	36%	41%
Teachers who thought their standards were Common Core	25%**	28%**
Teachers who thought their standards were adapted from Common Core	32%	35%
Teachers who thought their standards were not adapted from Common Core	46%	37%

NOTE: Asterisks indicate that a teacher in a given subgroup has significantly higher or lower odds of supporting standards, based on logistic regressions including all of the above variables as independent variables and the outcome as teachers' agreement that they support use of their state standards for math or ELA in instruction. Whether the teacher was from a PARCC or SBAC state was excluded from regressions given multicollinearity with the variable regarding teachers' perceptions of their standards. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$

### ***Teachers who thought their state had adopted Common Core were less supportive of using statewide assessments to measure mastery of standards.***

As noted in Figure 2, as well as Table 3, less than a third of teachers overall and in most subgroups supported the use of statewide assessments to measure mastery of standards. As with the subgroup analyses of support for the state standards, we used logistic regression to understand the extent to which teachers in a given subgroup supported their statewide assessment as compared with teachers in another subgroup (see Appendix A, Table A2). These regression analyses indicated that Common Core teachers were less likely to support both their mathematics and ELA tests than those who were not in Common Core states. Other findings varied depending on whether a teacher was responding in regard to use of tests to measure mastery of ELA standards or mathematics standards. Specifically, teachers from lower-income schools were more likely to support use of tests to measure mastery of ELA standards, and teachers with more ELLs were more likely to support tests to measure mastery of mathematics standards. On the other hand, teachers serving more students with an IEP were likely to support use of tests to measure mastery of mathematics standards. (See Table A2 for more details).

There could be various reasons for the differences in teacher support for standards and assessments that we observed in Tables 2 and 3. For example, general public opposition to the Common Core could be fueling lower support for standards and assessments among teachers who indicated they are in Common Core states. Furthermore, some of those in Common Core states are using PARCC and SBAC, which are both more innovative and rigorous than previous assessments;<sup>17</sup> teachers may be less likely to support those assessments because they lack familiarity with them. The higher support among teachers serving more ELL students and more FRL students is perhaps more difficult to understand. However, teachers serving more underserved, at-risk students may feel that standards and assessments are helpful for their students because they provide a set of high expectations for all students, no matter what their background or status.

### ***What factors were related to teachers' support for their state standards?***

To understand factors that might relate to teachers' support for their state standards, we examined teachers' agreement with various statements about their standards, and we compared

responses of those teachers who had reported supporting their state standards with those who did not. As with statements regarding their support for their mathematics and/or ELA standards, mathematics teachers responded to statements about their mathematics state standards, and ELA teachers responded to statements about their ELA standards. For a list of all the survey items referenced in this report, see Appendix B.

### ***Most teachers felt that mathematics and ELA standards provided postsecondary preparation for students and supported alignment from grade to grade, although majorities felt standards excluded important concepts and were not appropriate for special needs students.***

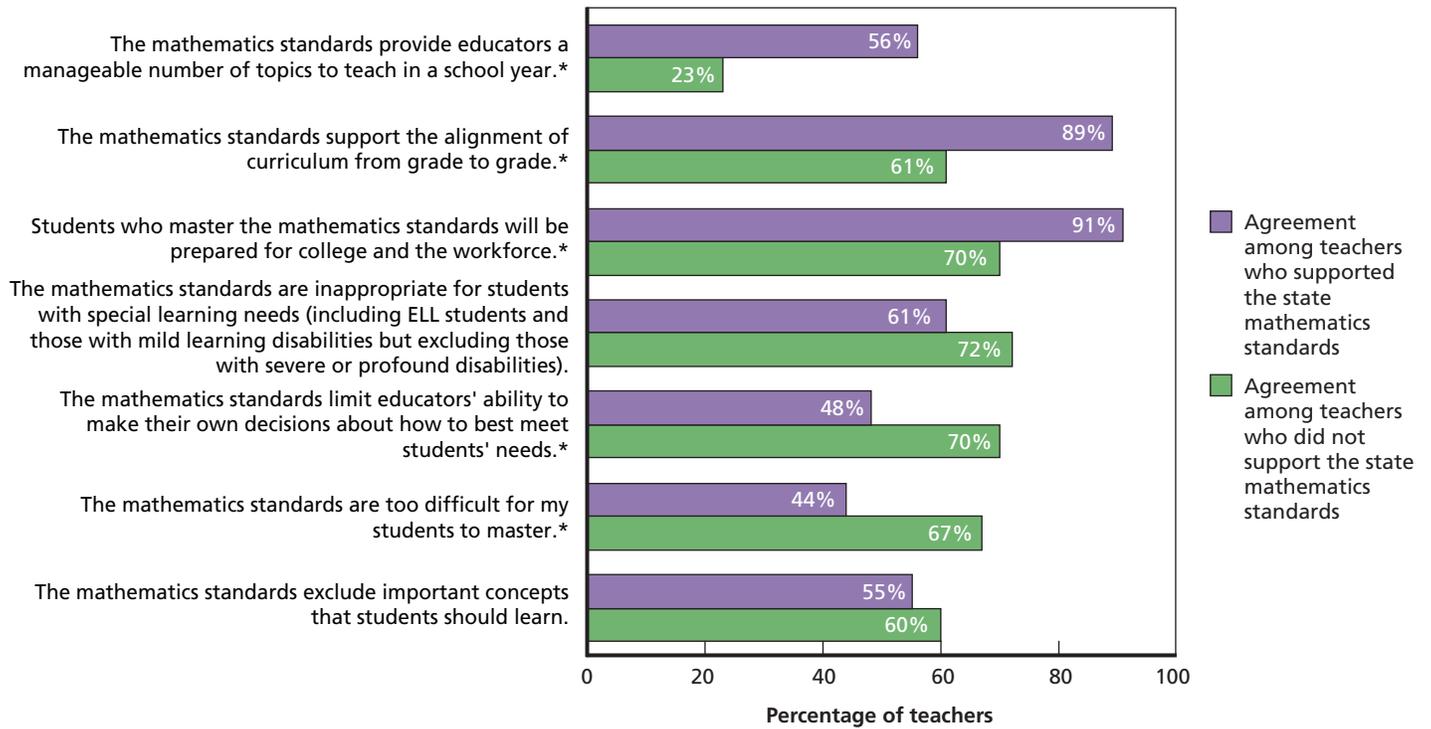
In general, those who supported their state standards were much more likely to agree with other positive statements about their standards compared with those who did not support their standards. Yet, regardless of whether teachers supported or did not support their standards, more than half did agree that their mathematics and ELA state standards prepared students for college and the workforce and supported alignment from grade to grade (see Figures 3 and 4). On the other hand, majorities of both those who did and did not support their standards also agreed that their standards excluded important concepts and were not appropriate for students with special learning needs.

### ***Those who did not support standards were less likely than supporters to think that their standards provided a manageable number of topics to teach in a year.***

The greatest difference among those who did and did not support their standards concerned the idea that the standards addressed a manageable number of topics. Among ELA teachers who supported their ELA standards, and among mathematics teachers who supported their mathematics standards, nearly 60 percent agreed that their respective standards provided a manageable number of topics, compared with just under one-quarter of those who did not support those standards. This finding suggests that the number of topics within the standards could be one issue driving support (or lack of support) for standards. Additional statements that particularly appeared to separate supporters from nonsupporters of state standards for both mathematics and ELA teachers included the following:

- “The [mathematics/ELA] standards support the alignment of curriculum from grade to grade”: Ninety percent of

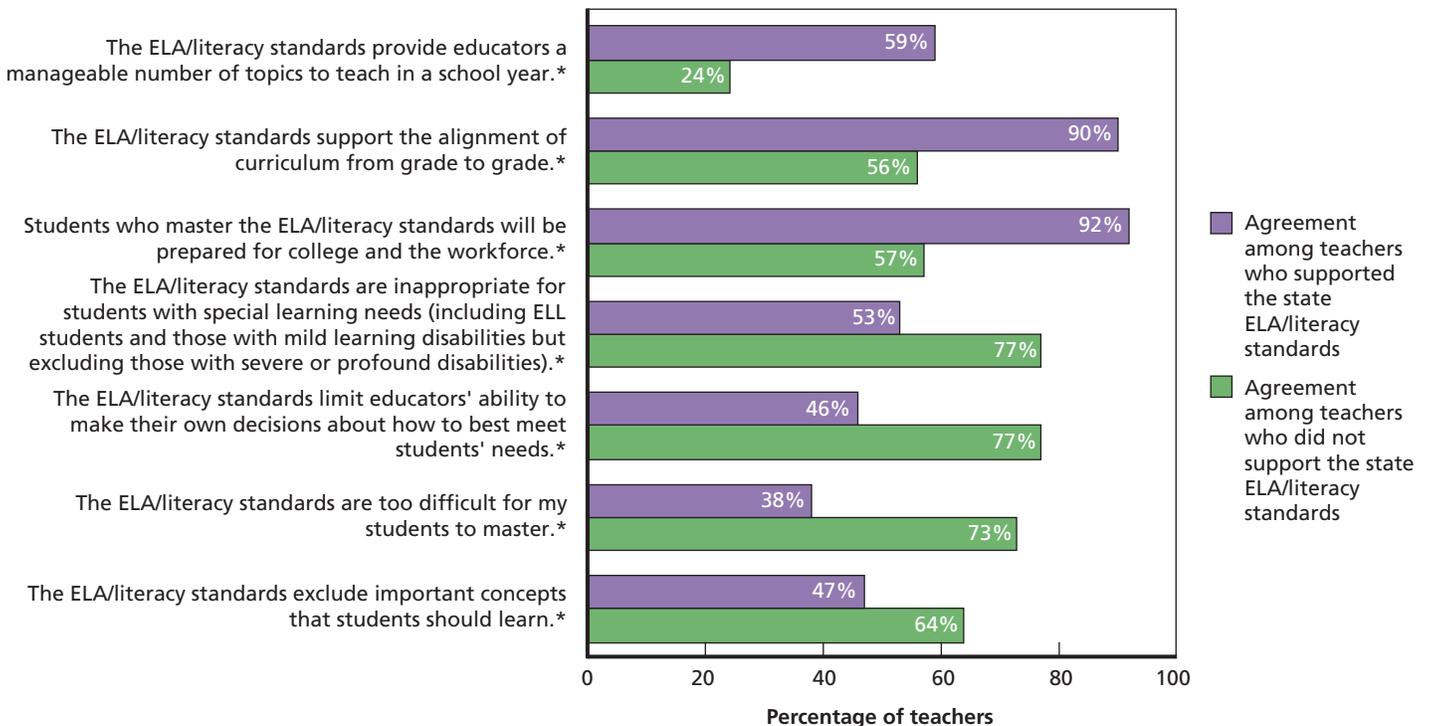
**Figure 3. Perceptions about standards among mathematics teachers who did and did not support use of mathematics standards in classroom instruction**



NOTE: Asterisks indicate significant difference in agreement with statements among mathematics teachers who did and did not support their mathematics standards.

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**Figure 4. Perceptions about standards among ELA teachers who did and did not support use of ELA standards in classroom instruction**



NOTE: Asterisks indicate significant difference in agreement with statements among ELA teachers who did and did not support their ELA standards.

those who supported their ELA and mathematics standards agreed with that statement, whereas about 60 percent of those who do not support their standards agreed with that statement.

- “The [mathematics/ELA] standards are too difficult for my students to master”: Over two-thirds of mathematics teachers and nearly three-quarters of ELA teachers who did not support their standards agreed with that statement, compared with 44 percent of mathematics teachers and 38 percent of ELA teachers who did support their standards.

The gaps in perceptions about standards were particularly pronounced for ELA teachers, at an average difference of 30 percentage points for agreement with any one statement between supporters and nonsupporters.

## What factors were related to teachers’ support for their statewide tests?

*Those who did not support their state tests were two to three times as likely as supporters to be concerned about test difficulty and the accuracy of test scores for students with special learning needs.*

We asked teachers to rate a series of concerns about state tests on the following scale: not a concern/slight concern/moderate concern/major concern. Figures 5 and 6 capture the percentages of teachers who rated each concern as major. Teachers generally did not rate most issues as major concerns for them. That said, those who did not support the use of their statewide tests to measure mastery of standards were more likely to report major concerns than their counterparts who did support state tests. Specifically, among mathematics and ELA teachers who supported use of state tests, no more than a quarter noted any test-related issue we asked about as a major concern. However, among those who did not support use of state tests, majorities of both mathematics and ELA teachers noted two particular issues as major concerns for them: that the state-mandated mathematics and ELA tests would be too difficult for their students, and that the tests would not provide accurate scores for students with special learning needs.

Two additional factors distinguished teachers who supported their state tests and teachers who did not for both mathematics and ELA. That is, roughly 40 percent of the teachers who did not support their state tests were concerned that the work required of them to prepare students for the state-mandated test

would take time away from other more important classroom work. In contrast, only 8 percent of mathematics teachers and 13 percent of ELA teachers who supported their assessments said the same. Similarly, between 40 and 45 percent of teachers who did not support the state tests were concerned that the results from the assessments would not provide useful data to inform their instruction. Among teachers who supported the assessments, under 20 percent cited this as a major concern.

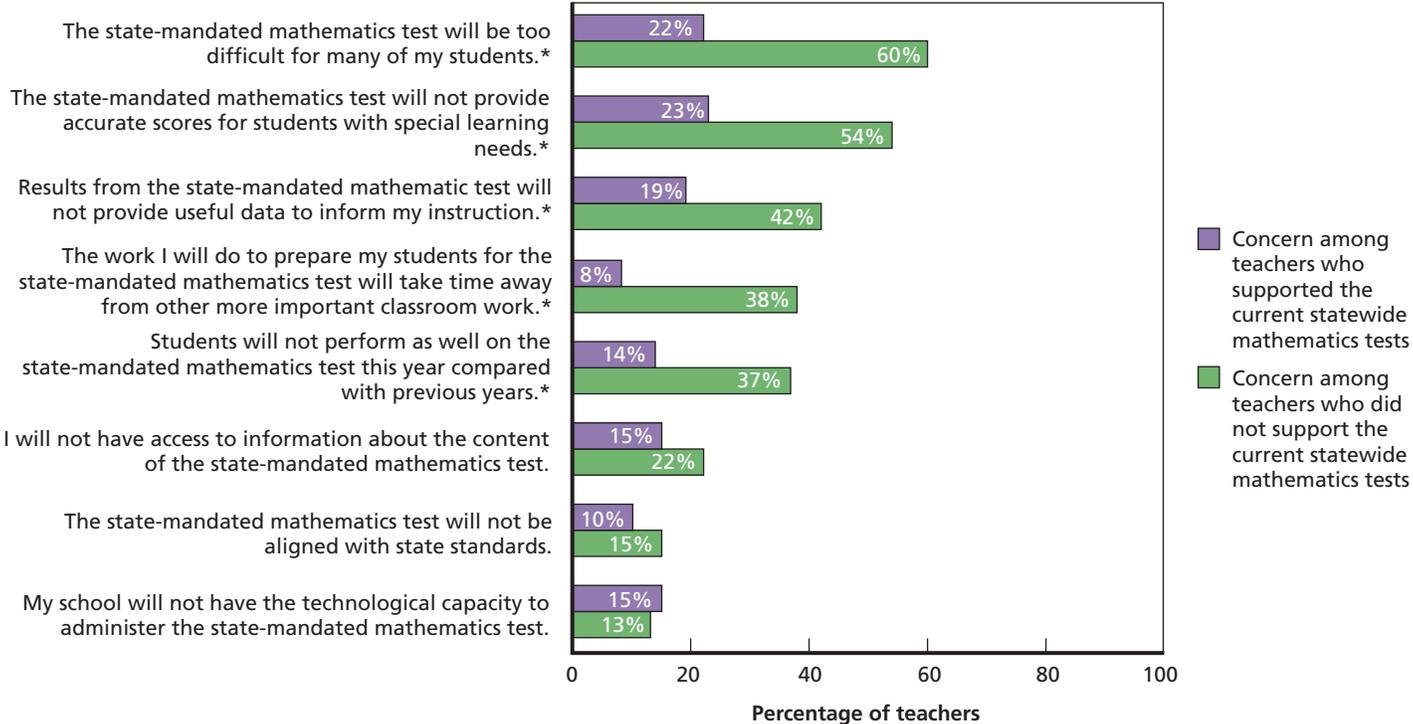
Some of the test-related issues we had anticipated as concerns for teachers were in fact not perceived by teachers as major concerns and did not help distinguish among teachers who supported and teachers who did not support their state tests. For instance, fewer than a quarter of the teachers from either group were concerned that the state test would not be aligned with their state standards. Additionally, low percentages of teachers were concerned about the technological capacity of their schools to administer the state tests.

## Have teachers’ concerns about assessment changed over time?

The prior analyses focused only on teachers’ responses to the February 2016 survey. However, the American Teacher Panel is intended to also track changes in teachers’ perceptions over time to provide information about longitudinal change in how particular policies could be impacting teachers’ work in schools. For example, diminishing concerns about state assessments could imply that teachers have gained more information about their assessments and feel more comfortable with implementation of those assessments. A year prior, in February 2015, we had asked teachers the same questions regarding their concerns about assessment as we did in February 2016. The statewide testing concerns we asked about in both years included:

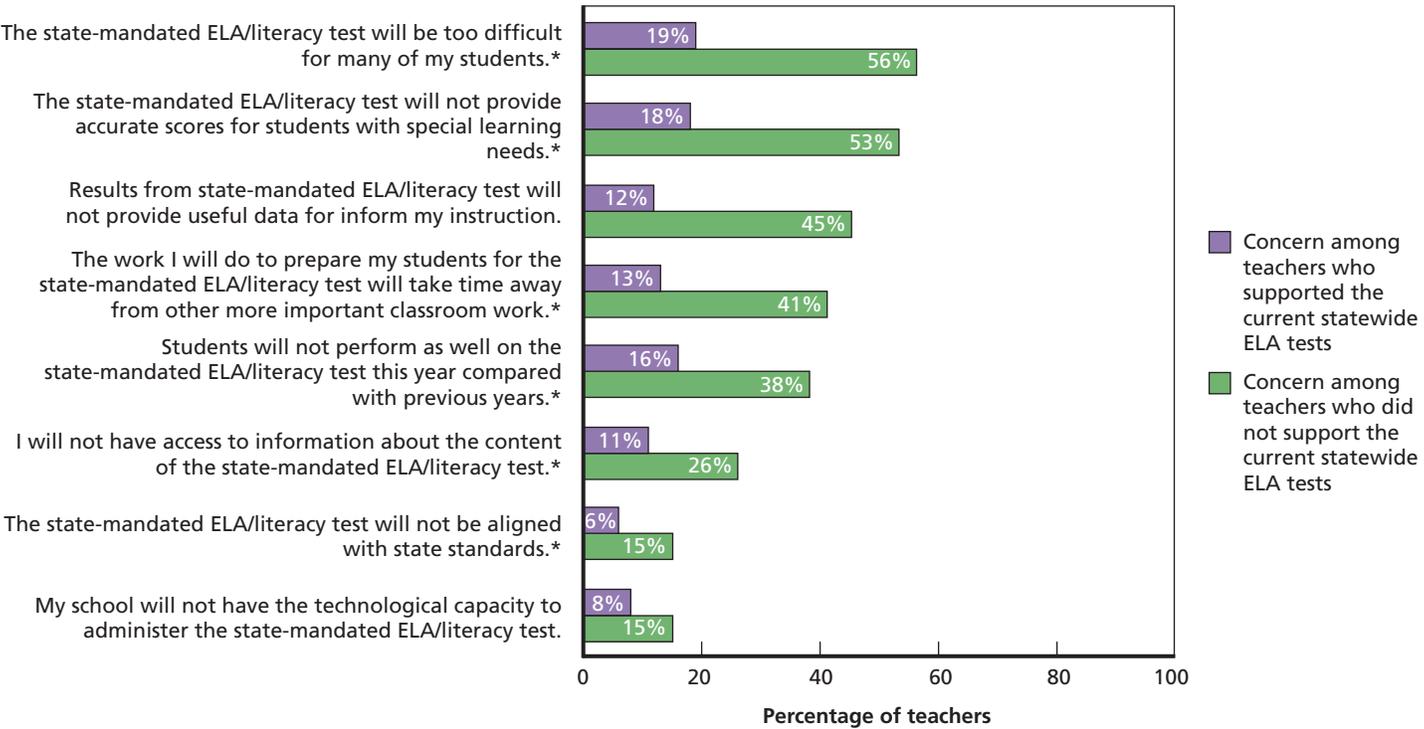
- I will not have access to information about the content of the state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test.
- The state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test will not be aligned with state standards.
- The state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test will be too difficult for many of my students.
- Students will not perform as well as on the state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test this year compared with previous years.
- The work I will do to prepare my students for the state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test will take time away from other more important classroom work.
- The state-mandated [mathematics/ELA] test will not provide accurate scores for students with special learning needs.

**Figure 5. Major concerns about the state mathematics test among mathematics teachers who did and did not support use of the current statewide mathematics test to measure mastery of standards**



NOTE: Asterisks indicate significant difference in concerns among mathematics teachers who did and did not support use of mathematics tests to measure mastery of standards.

**Figure 6. Major concerns about the state ELA test among ELA teachers who did and did not support use of the current statewide ELA test to measure mastery of standards**



NOTE: Asterisks indicate significant difference in concerns among ELA teachers who did and did not support use of ELA tests to measure mastery of standards.

A large group of the same teachers responded to these items in both years ( $n = 199$  for questions about their concerns regarding mathematics assessments and  $n = 263$  for questions about concerns regarding ELA assessments). Although this subsample is not necessarily representative of all U.S. teachers, the analysis can provide some indication of changes in the perceptions of teachers over time. Our analyses indicated that teachers' responses to these six items were highly correlated (Cronbach alpha = 0.85 for mathematics and 0.87 for ELA). We therefore combined these items together into a single index to capture magnitude of concerns about state assessments and examined any change in the average responses to all these items for the same teachers in 2015 and 2016.

***We observed no significant change in teachers' overall concerns about their state-mandated mathematics assessments from 2015 to 2016, although concerns about the state-mandated ELA assessments decreased significantly for teachers in several subgroups.***

We found no change in the extent to which teachers were concerned about the set of potential issues we identified for either mathematics or ELA state-mandated assessments from 2015 to 2016 (see Table 4). We did find a decrease in concerns about the ELA state-mandated assessments for some groups. Specifically, for teachers in states that administered the PARCC state-mandated assessments for ELA in both 2015 and 2016, concerns about their ELA assessments decreased significantly. We also observed a significant decrease in concerns among teachers in higher-income schools and those serving fewer ELLs.

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## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite some public outcry and resistance to state standards reported by the media, our data suggest that the vast majorities of U.S. mathematics and ELA teachers support use of state standards in instruction, regardless of who they teach and the state context in which they teach. While teachers in some subgroups—including those serving more ELLs and low-income students—were a little more likely to support their standards, more than 80 percent of teachers in any subgroup reported that they support use of their state standards in instruction.

Teachers who reported supporting their state standards were generally more likely to agree with positive statements

about their standards and disagree with negative ones. But, regardless of whether they supported their standards, most teachers agreed that their standards prepared students for college and the workforce and were aligned from grade to grade. On the other hand, most teachers also agreed that the standards excluded some important concepts and were not necessarily appropriate for students with special learning needs. Thus, even those who supported their state standards did not think those standards were without flaws. That said, one statement that particularly separated those who supported standards from those who did not was “The [mathematics/ELA] standards provide educators with a manageable number of topics to teach in a school year.” Supporters of their state standards were twice as likely to agree with that statement, compared with teachers who did not support their standards, suggesting that the number of topics within standards could be one key reason for support (or lack of support) for standards. This is an interesting finding given the intention of Common Core to focus more deeply on fewer topics compared to previous state standards.<sup>18</sup> Some research indicates that the Common Core also places new emphasis on content and topics that teachers may not have taught before, and their curricula may still retain topics not related to the Common Core or new standards.<sup>19</sup> As a result, teachers in states that have formally adopted Common Core may feel as if they must teach too many topics.

In contrast to wide support of standards, much lower percentages of teachers reported that they support use of current state tests to measure mastery of standards. Depending on their context and the students they taught, between about 20 and 50 percent of teachers reported support for their state tests, with about one-third of all teachers reporting support for their tests on average. Thus, testing appears to be a much more concerning issue for teachers compared with use of state standards in instruction and may be a key issue for states and districts to consider when implementing and supporting testing over the next year.

We observed stark differences in concerns about the state-wide assessment between those who supported and those who did not support its use for measuring mastery of standards. Given that assessments are tied to teacher evaluation in many states and that assessment results are publicly reported, the lower proportion of teachers expressing support for assessments—compared with those supporting state standards—is perhaps unsurprising. Those who did not support assessments were two to three times as likely as supporters of assessments to indicate “major concerns” regarding test difficulty, accuracy of assessment scores for students with special learning needs, that test results would provide

**Table 4. Extent of concerns about state-mandated assessments for the same teachers who responded to both the February 2015 and February 2016 surveys (aggregated for all concerns across all teachers)**

Subgroup	Mathematics Teachers (n = 199)		ELA Teachers (n = 263)	
	February 2015	February 2016	February 2015	February 2016
All Teachers	2.57	2.53	2.49	2.40
Teachers in states with the PARCC assessment	2.64	2.51	2.67	2.41*
Teachers in states with the SBAC assessment	2.66	2.62	2.60	2.42
Teachers in states not using the PARCC or SBAC assessment	2.53	2.51	2.41	2.39
Teachers in lower-income schools	2.61	2.71	2.53	2.56
Teachers in higher-income schools	2.55	2.44	2.47	2.35*
Teachers with higher percentages of ELLs	2.68	2.76	2.62	2.65
Teachers with lower percentages of ELLs	2.54	2.46	2.44	2.31*
Teachers with higher percentages of students with IEPs	2.79	2.75	2.68	2.56
Teachers with lower percentages of students with IEPs	2.47	2.42	2.40	2.34
Elementary (K–5) teachers	2.64	2.64	2.66	2.63
Secondary (6–12) teachers	2.47	2.38	2.35	2.22*

NOTE: Asterisk indicates significant difference between same teachers in February 2015 and February 2016 about concerns related to statewide tests.

useful data to inform instruction, and that the work required to prepare students for the state-mandated test would likely take time away from other more important classroom work. That said, even among those who did not support use of state tests to measure mastery of standards, the only major concerns cited by more than half of teachers were test difficulty and accuracy of tests for students with special learning needs.

We also compared the extent of teachers' concerns about testing in 2015 and 2016. Teachers' average ratings across all the concerns we asked about in the survey (on a scale from "not at all" to "major" concern) changed very little from 2015 to 2016, whereas average ratings of concerns about the current statewide ELA tests decreased significantly for teachers in states that had adopted Common Core or similar state standards and—in particular—for teachers in states that administered the PARCC assessment in both 2015 and 2016, as well as for teachers in schools serving fewer low-income students and fewer ELLs. Over a longer period of time, as teachers gain familiarity with tests and their content, teachers' concerns could potentially decrease more.

### Lessons for States and Districts

Our findings indicate that the vast majority of teachers have embraced use of standards in their classrooms. However, at the

same time, teachers—particularly those who do not support their standards—believe that their standards do not provide a manageable number of topics to address in a year. Districts may wish to consider whether the curricula and instructional materials they recommend are helping teachers to focus on their standards or are pushing teachers to address many topics beyond their standards. In addition, districts might consider how they can provide professional development that helps teachers understand the scope and sequence of the standards they should address at their grade level, which might help teachers feel less overwhelmed and better able to streamline their instruction. States, too, can play a role in helping teachers focus on their standards by vetting and recommending standards-aligned instructional materials.

Our survey findings suggest that states and districts have much more work to do in regard to supporting implementation of state tests to measure students' mastery of standards. Many of teachers' concerns are likely related to how quickly newer tests have been implemented and tied to high-stakes decisions. States are already moving away from linking test results to evaluation of teachers and schools, and this could ameliorate some of teachers' concerns about tests in the short term. Regardless, states should strive to ensure that state assessments are closely aligned with their standards, and communicate the linkages between standards and assessments—and the specific content

of tests—as clearly as possible to teachers, schools, and families. Teachers may feel less frustration with accountability requirements if they know what to expect regarding their assessments and have clear evidence that their assessments are tied closely to the standards that they are expected to teach.

In addition, states and districts should reflect on how to address the challenge of test difficulty that teachers have identified in our survey, particularly with regard to students with special needs. Some research has confirmed that the newer PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests aligned with the Common Core are indeed more challenging than previous tests and focus more on complex thinking skills and problem-solving.<sup>20</sup> To support students for success on these tests, teachers must be provided with better support to address state standards in their instruction and help students master standards. In addition, states and districts may wish to carefully consider how to adapt tests for students with special needs and how to best support teachers who are working with those special needs students. Standards-aligned formative assessments and instructional materials play an important role in this work. Yet, only a small number of instructional materials have been identified as aligned with Common Core and similar standards, and there

is almost no evidence that current formative assessments used in most schools and districts are closely aligned with standards. Thus, states and districts are faced with the challenge of vetting and reviewing materials and assessments for their quality and alignment with state standards.

States could also consider how to develop their own instructional materials to support teachers' work to address standards. States such as Louisiana and New York could serve as role models in terms of their work to identify and develop strongly aligned instructional materials and assessments. Open Educational Resource (OER) providers—and those supporting such providers—could also play a role by pushing development and testing of standards-aligned online digital materials and formative assessments that could be made freely available to educators and students. EngageNY is an early example of such work, and LearnZillion and others have followed the lead of EngageNY by providing both materials and professional development support. If states, districts, and other organizations can work together to create strong instructional materials and professional development aligned with most state standards, teachers will be able to focus more time and attention on supporting students in the classroom and helping them master state standards.

Our survey findings suggest that states and districts have much more work to do in regard to supporting implementation of state tests to measure students' mastery of standards.

## APPENDIX A: ODDS RATIOS

**Table A1. Odds ratios for groups significantly more or less likely to support mathematics or ELA standards**

	<b>Odds Ratios for Being Significantly More or Less Likely to Support Mathematics Standards</b>	<b>Odds Ratios for Being Significantly More or Less Likely to Support ELA Standards</b>
Teachers who think they are in a state that has adopted Common Core for [math/ELA] (vs. teachers who do not)	0.50*	Not significant
Teachers in schools in the highest quartile % FRL students (vs. fourth quartile)	3.36***	3.08**
Teachers in schools in the second quartile % FRL students (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in schools in the third quartile % FRL students (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the highest quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	3.18**
Teachers in the second quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the third quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	7.13*	Not significant
Teachers in the highest quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the second quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the third quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Elementary teachers (vs. secondary)	Not significant	0.34***
Ungraded teachers (vs. secondary)	Not significant	Not significant
Each year of teacher experience	0.959**	Not significant

NOTES: \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A2. Odds ratios for groups significantly more or less likely to support mathematics or ELA assessments**

	<b>Odds Ratios for Groups Significantly More or Less Likely to Support Mathematics Assessments</b>	<b>Odds Ratios for Groups Significantly More or Less Likely to Support ELA Assessments</b>
Teachers who think they are in a state that has adopted Common Core for [math/ELA] (vs. teachers who do not)	0.60**	0.60**
Teachers in PARCC states (vs. teachers in all other non-PARCC states)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in schools in the highest quartile % FRL (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	1.008**
Teachers in schools in the second quartile % FRL students (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	0.47*
Teachers in schools in the third quartile % FRL (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	0.43**
Teachers in the highest quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	1.79***	Not significant
Teachers in the second quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the third quartile % ELLs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the highest quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	0.395**	Not significant
Teachers in the second quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Teachers in the third quartile % students with IEPs (vs. fourth quartile)	Not significant	Not significant
Elementary teachers (vs. secondary)	Not significant	Not significant
Ungraded teachers (vs. secondary)	Not significant	0.03*
Each year of teacher experience	Not significant	Not significant

NOTE: \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Q5. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about your state standards in mathematics.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>I Don't Know</b>
The mathematics standards exclude important concepts that students should learn.					
Students who master the mathematics standards will be prepared for college and the workforce.					
The mathematics standards are too difficult for my students to master.					
The mathematics standards limit educators' ability to make their own decisions about how to best meet students' needs.					
The mathematics standards support the alignment of curriculum from grade to grade.					
The mathematics standards provide educators a manageable number of topics to teach in a school year.					
The mathematics standards are inappropriate for students with special learning needs (including ELL students and those with mild learning disabilities but excluding those with severe or profound disabilities).					
I support the use of the state mathematics standards in classroom instruction.					
I support use of the current statewide tests to measure student mastery of state mathematics standards.					

**Q9. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about your state standards in English language arts & literacy.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>I Don't Know</b>
The ELA/literacy standards exclude important concepts that students should learn.					
Students who master the ELA/literacy standards will be prepared for college and the workforce.					
The ELA/literacy standards are too difficult for my students to master.					
The ELA/literacy standards limit educators' ability to make their own decisions about how to best meet students' needs.					
The ELA/literacy standards support the alignment of curriculum from grade to grade.					
The ELA/literacy standards provide educators a manageable number of topics to teach in a school year.					
The ELA/literacy standards are inappropriate for students with special learning needs (including ELL students and those with mild learning disabilities but excluding those with severe or profound disabilities).					
I support the use of the state ELA/literacy standards in classroom instruction.					
I support use of the current statewide tests to measure student mastery of state ELA/literacy standards.					

**Q22. How much concern do you have about the following issues related to the main state-mandated mathematics test that your students will be given in 2015–16, which you selected for the previous question?**

	<b>Not a Concern</b>	<b>Minor Concern</b>	<b>Moderate Concern</b>	<b>Major Concern</b>
I will not have access to information about the content of the state-mandated mathematics test.				
The state-mandated mathematics test will not be aligned with state standards.				
The state-mandated mathematics test will be too difficult for many of my students.				
Students will not perform as well on the state-mandated mathematics test this year compared to previous years.				
The work I will do to prepare my students for the state-mandated mathematics test will take time away from other more important classroom work.				
My school will not have the technological capacity to administer the state-mandated mathematics test.				
The state-mandated mathematics test will not provide accurate scores for students with special learning needs.				
Results from the state-mandated mathematics test will not provide useful data to inform my instruction.				

**Q28. How much concern do you have about the following issues related to the main state-mandated English language arts & literacy test that your students will be given in 2015–16, which you selected for the previous question?**

	<b>Not a Concern</b>	<b>Minor Concern</b>	<b>Moderate Concern</b>	<b>Major Concern</b>
I will not have access to information about the content of the state-mandated test for ELA/literacy.				
The state-mandated ELA/literacy test for my students will not be aligned with state standards.				
The state-mandated ELA/literacy test will be too difficult for many of my students.				
Students will not perform as well on the state-mandated ELA/literacy test this year compared to previous years.				
The work I will do to prepare my students for the state-mandated ELA/literacy test will take time away from other more important classroom work.				
My school will not have the technological capacity to administer the state-mandated ELA/literacy test.				
The state-mandated ELA/literacy test will not provide accurate scores for students with special learning needs.				
Results from the state-mandated ELA/literacy test will not provide useful data to inform my instruction.				

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see U.S. Department of Education (2015).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brown (2015) and Ujifusa (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For more on changes to standards in those states, see Cano (2016) and Colangelo and Chapman (2016). Also see Korn, Gamboa, and Polikoff (2016).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Brown (2015) and Ujifusa (2015).

<sup>5</sup> See U.S. Department of Education (2017).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Weatherly and Lipsky's (1977) acknowledgment of teachers as "street-level bureaucrats" who are the key policy implementers, as well as research on teachers' implementation of national and state policies (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1990; and Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Coburn (2004 and 2006), Jennings (1996), and Spillane (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Additional information regarding the total sample size and respondents to the February 2015 survey can be found at Kaufman et al. (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Response rates for large, national surveys have been in decline, and this tendency accelerated after the emergence of web questionnaires. A meta-study of 68 surveys in 49 studies by Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) found an average 40-percent response rate among national survey studies. Similarly, Nulty (2008) found that responses to web-based surveys ranged between 20 and 47 percent.

<sup>10</sup> Weights were based on a model for nonresponse that incorporates such characteristics as teacher subject, school level, region size, and rate of FRL eligibility. For the February 2016 survey, teachers of core subjects (math, ELA, science, and social studies) responded at higher rates than teachers of other subjects; teachers from the Midwest region of the United States responded at higher rates than teachers from other regions, and teachers from the Northeast region of the United States responded at lower rates than teachers from other regions. No other major subgroup differences were observed or accounted for through the weighting.

<sup>11</sup> In the February 2016 survey, we asked teachers to report which subjects they taught and used their response to that item to determine whether that teacher was a mathematics or ELA teacher. Those who taught both mathematics and ELA in self-contained classrooms reported on both mathematics and ELA standards and assessments.

<sup>12</sup> To determine which states had administered PARCC or SBAC in 2015–2016, we referenced Certica (2017) and Common Core State Standards Initiative (2017a). We then followed up on state education agency websites and in the media to confirm shifts toward or away from PARCC or SBAC during the 2015–2016 year.

<sup>13</sup> We considered teachers in states that have adopted Common Core to be any teachers in states other than Alaska, Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Given that Minnesota has adopted the Common Core for ELA but not mathematics, we included Minnesota as a Common Core state in any analysis throughout this report referencing ELA or ELA standards. These states were excluded based on documented state adoption of Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017a).

<sup>14</sup> Indiana, for example, has incorporated many standards from Common Core into its state standards, as has South Carolina (Achieve, 2014 and 2015).

<sup>15</sup> We applied the Rao-Scott chi-square test for any comparisons. For any items where we compared subgroups of teachers on multiple related survey responses (e.g., perceptions about state standards or concerns about assessment), we used the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure to adjust for multiple comparisons, applying a false discovery rate of 0.05. For more information, see Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Any teachers who indicated that they address mathematics and/or ELA state standards in their instruction were asked, respectively, about their support and perceptions of their mathematics and/or ELA standards. Elementary teachers of both math and ELA were asked about both mathematics and ELA standards and assessments. We focused only on reports of mathematics and ELA teachers for this report.

<sup>17</sup> See Herman and Linn (2013) and Herman, Matrondola, and Wang (2015).

<sup>18</sup> See Common Core State Standards Initiative (2017b).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Porter et al. (2011).

<sup>20</sup> See Herman and Linn (2013) and Herman, Matrondola and Wang (2015).

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## About This Report

In this report, we use data from the February 2016 survey of the American Teacher Panel to provide evidence on teachers' perceptions about their state standards and assessments. At the time of the administration of the February 2016 survey, the American Teacher Panel was composed of approximately 2,963 teachers. Respondents were paid an incentive of \$25 for every 30 minutes of survey time. To ensure representativeness, panel members were sampled randomly from across the nation. The population for this sample included full-time public school teachers in grades K–12 in all subjects, including teachers of special education students and English-language learners. The survey data were weighted to account for differential sampling and nonresponse. Weights were based on a model for nonresponse that incorporated such characteristics as subject taught, school level, region size, and proportion of free and reduced-price lunch eligibility among students in the school. For the February 2016 survey, teachers of core subjects (mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies) responded at higher rates than teachers of other subjects; teachers from the Midwest region of the United States responded at higher rates than teachers from other regions; and teachers from the Northeast region of the United States responded at lower rates than teachers from other regions. No other major subgroup differences were observed or accounted for through the weighting.

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