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Local Advocacy, National Impact

Analyzing the growth and evolution of the Coalition Support Network

Prepared for The Coalition Support Network

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Executive summary

In 2013, Achieve created the Coalition Support Network (CSN) to convene and bolster state-based advocacy coalitions defending college- and career-ready standards. The CSN has evolved to tackle new issues, like high-quality assessments and accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and has continually adapted its approach to building strong coalitions based on experience and shifting context (Figure ES1). Today, it provides training, communications resources, policy analysis, and an infrastructure to promote learning between coalitions.

The battle over standards is largely settled. ESSA plans are moving into implementation. The CSN's work to strengthen coalitions' relationships, hone advocacy and programmatic skills, and support authentic grassroots and grass-tops engagement has become more important as policy debates are shaped increasingly by state and local contexts rather than a national agenda.

The *Local Advocacy, National Impact* report describes how the CSN has become a flexible force for sustaining change in education. It recounts the CSN's evolution and impact, focusing on the key victories its coalitions achieved and how the CSN contributed to them. The report draws on structured interviews with coalition leaders, and a synthesis of data from three years of continuous evaluation of the larger advocacy effort on college and career readiness of which the CSN was an essential part.

The report draws four conclusions:

- 1. With a clear policy charge, the CSN builds state efforts into national progress.** The CSN was established in 2013 to defend college- and career-ready standards in crucial states and build momentum across the country. The founding coalitions in the CSN (now called "CSN 1.0") were chosen to include a portfolio of exemplars – states facing significant challenges, but with the potential to succeed (Figure ES2). The CSN's support nurtured fledgling coalitions to help them win battles over high standards and position themselves for future success. Ultimately, CSN coalitions in states with landmark standards fights backstopped the standards reform movement nationwide and helped secure high standards across the country.
- 2. Once policies are in place, the CSN enables sustainable implementation and innovation.** With the standards in place and states launching new standards-aligned assessments in 2014, the CSN helped coalitions tackle the challenges of implementing high standards, especially assessments and public engagement. The CSN added "CSN 2.0" states that were on the frontlines of battles over high-quality assessments and would set national trends. The CSN's Innovate to Achieve program funded states to test strategies and tactics, and to model creative approaches to policy and political challenges for the network. Cumulatively, CSN 2.0 helped the standards stay strong and won commitments to high-quality assessments in CSN states and beyond.
- 3. In times of rapid change, the CSN helps coalitions evolve and become more representative of their states.** With ESSA's passage at the end of 2015 and subsiding political controversy over high standards, the

Figure ES1

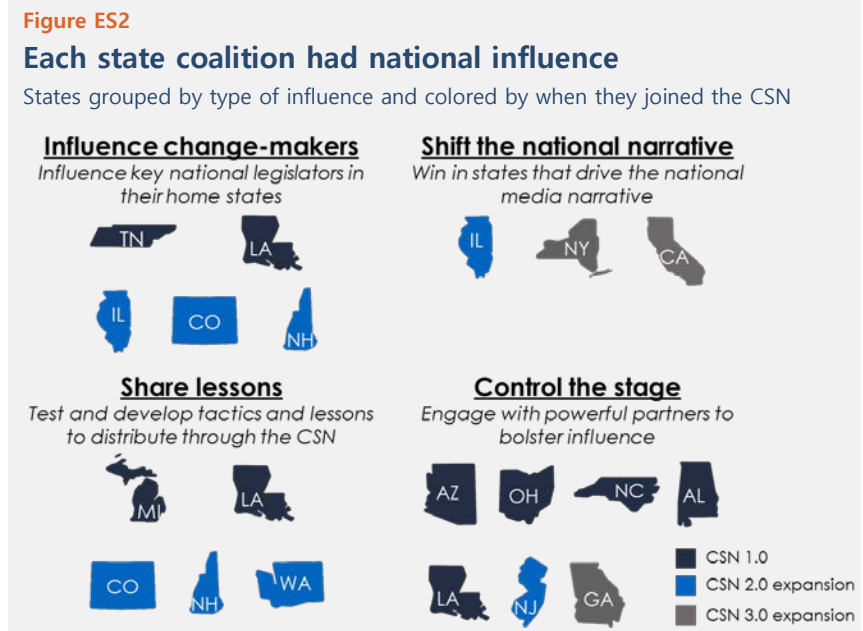
The CSN's view of strong coalitions has shifted based on experience and context

Primary factors for selection of CSN members



CSN offered more flexibility to address state-specific agendas. “CSN 3.0” broadened the issues on which coalitions could request support, while maintaining the commitment to college- and career-ready goals. Coalitions appreciated the CSN’s long-term commitment as they matured because it helped ensure they had the necessary capacity and reputation to take on new issues and expand their relationships with key constituencies. The CSN also provided continuity, resources, and training for new leaders. CSN 3.0 expanded the CSN’s capacity to provide more targeted support to states as the coalitions continued to learn from one another.

- 4. These capabilities position the CSN as a flexible force for sustaining change in education.** The CSN’s tailored support to over a dozen coalitions has helped them prepare for policy debates and sustain momentum. Going forward, the CSN offers a unique and tested set of four skills and resources for the field: 1) Expertise to translate public priorities into detailed policy; 2) Connections between state-level advocates and national allies; 3) Communications expertise and resources; and 4) Innovative, replicable programs to support both advocacy and implementation. These skills have proven to be relevant when states are pursuing a common agenda, like high standards, as well as when states are pursuing multiple agendas, like when states began to diverge on approaches to assessments and accountability plans.



The CSN was originally conceived by Achieve as a vehicle to elevate local coalitions in states with national influence in service of higher standards. The work has since evolved into a holistic effort to put local coalitions at the forefront of improving education through policy advocacy and implementation. The CSN, with the enthusiastic support of its coalitions, has now spun off from Achieve to become Seek Common Ground.

As an independent organization retaining the CSN’s core staff, Seek Common Ground can continue to provide the resources, practices, innovation grants, and peer learning environment that made the CSN successful and valuable to state coalitions. At the same time, it will have greater flexibility to pursue a holistic vision of education improvement and support a diverse set of coalitions and local policy goals. Seek Common Ground’s work will continue to be essential as states strive to build public education systems that create lifelong opportunity for all students.

The Coalition Support Network has become a flexible force for sustaining change

In 2013, Achieve created the Coalition Support Network (CSN) to convene and bolster state-based advocacy coalitions defending college- and career-ready standards. The CSN has evolved over time to tackle new issues, like high-quality assessments and accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and now provides advocacy training, communications resources, policy support, and an infrastructure to connect coalitions across states.

With the battle over standards largely settled, assessments stabilizing in most states, and ESSA plans moving into implementation, state advocates are revisiting their priorities and strategies. The CSN seeks to seize this opportunity to scale up support to state coalitions as they pursue new challenges across the policy, practice, and advocacy landscapes.

The CSN's work to strengthen coalitions even as they navigate difficult issues that threaten to split them, hone coalitions' advocacy and programmatic skills, and support authentic grassroots and grass-tops engagement grows ever more important as the education spotlight shifts from the federal level to states and districts. The CSN has been designed by the coalitions it serves to help them build and use real power to improve education. The CSN has the established relationships and trusted experience necessary to advance change.

This report describes how the CSN has become a flexible force for sustaining change in education by telling the story of its evolution, focusing on the key victories its coalitions achieved and how the CSN contributed to them. The report closes by reflecting on how the capabilities the CSN has built position it to play a crucial role across state and local policy advocacy and implementation efforts to come. The report draws on structured interviews with the CSN's leadership and coalition leaders, and a synthesis of data from three years of continuous evaluation of the larger advocacy effort on college and career readiness of which the CSN was an essential part.

The report draws four conclusions:

1. With a clear policy charge, the CSN builds state efforts into national progress;
2. Once policies are in place, the CSN enables sustainable implementation and innovation;
3. In times of rapid change, the CSN helps coalitions evolve and become more representative; and
4. These capabilities position the CSN as a flexible force for sustaining change in education.

With a clear policy charge, the CSN builds state efforts into national progress

The CSN was established with the mission to defend college- and career-ready standards in the states that needed it most, while building political momentum across the country.

The Common Core State Standards were a state-led, bipartisan initiative to ensure that children graduate from high school ready for college and careers. It aimed to hold students to the same high standards for math and English Language Arts regardless of where they live or their circumstances, replacing the patchwork of learning goals that varied widely across states and often fell short of what students needed to succeed after graduating from high school. By the end of 2011, forty-six states had adopted Common Core.

By 2012, however, Common Core faced pushback due to perceived federal overreach, misconceptions regarding the content of the standards, implementation challenges, and opposition to assessments. Legislation began cropping up in states across the country to repeal the Common Core standards and return to previous state standards that set low expectations for students.

In response, state and local education advocates started to band together to defend high standards. These current and former teachers, concerned business leaders, local policy experts, and committed parents recognized that students were graduating high school unprepared to earn college degrees or living wages. Achieve launched the CSN in 2013 with the goal of helping these advocates form stronger, more diverse coalitions authentic to their state contexts, and to share resources and lessons across states to improve their work.

The CSN was initially crafted to protect the standards in key states

In 2012, Achieve COO, Sandy Boyd, conceptualized a network that would elevate the state-level voices of support for high expectations whom she encountered in her advocacy work. It was clear that there was will among advocates to champion high expectations for students, but capacity and organization were lacking. With support from the Helmsley Charitable Trust, Boyd was able to secure the resources to form a network of state-based advocates. She hired Michael Gilligan from the Hunt Institute to manage the network based on his experience both as a state-based advocate and due to his organizing efforts with the nascent movement.

The founding members of the CSN, selected in 2013 and now referred to as “CSN 1.0,” were intentionally chosen to include a portfolio of potential exemplars for the country – states facing significant challenges, but with the potential to succeed given

CSN support in the network's early days was essential to building basic capacities that positioned the coalitions for future success.

the right supports. States were selected through a rigorous application and evaluation process based on criteria that Achieve saw as primary determinants of coalition strength (see Figure 1). Top factors included:

- **Strength of plan:** The CSN weighted coalitions' strategic plans as the top factor for network selection. The most points were awarded to coalitions that presented a clear and complete plan for action with measurable and realistic goals. These plans were highly individualized based on state contexts, but also accounted for national trends and interest in learning from other coalitions.
- **Management and lead organization:** The CSN sought coalitions led by organizations with proven track records in their states. In addition, each coalition needed a full-time senior leader who could coordinate and serve as the public voice of the coalition.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** The CSN assessed coalitions' ability to effectively reach key audiences and stakeholders, as well as whether coalitions had an innovative, successful track record.

Figure 1

The CSN evaluated factors that define strong coalitions

Primary factors for CSN 1.0



Establishes a clear plan to achieve a specific goal



Has a strong leader



Is able to reach key stakeholders

Using these factors, the CSN aimed to ensure that coalitions could both develop winning strategies and execute them. In addition, the CSN awarded points for diversity of coalition membership, funding sustainability of the coalition, and clearly articulated need for CSN support.

Based on these criteria, the first cohort of CSN members included coalitions from Ohio (The Ohio Standard), Tennessee (Expect More Achieve More Tennessee), Arizona (Expect More Arizona), Alabama (Alabama GRIT), North Carolina (HIRE Standards NC), and Michigan (Michigan Coalition for Higher Student Standards); Louisiana (Geaux Higher Louisiana) joined soon after.

CSN support was instrumental to fledgling advocacy coalitions

We conducted interviews with CSN members to understand how and to what extent the CSN contributed to landmark state coalition victories. In these interviews, we asked coalitions to recount their goals, tactics, challenges, and successes. We also

“The grant process... really required us to sit down and think about what we wanted this coalition to be and what we wanted to do... and having an accountability partner helped us stick to it.”
-Thomas Rains

asked them to rate the impact of the CSN on the state coalition’s key capacities and a set of factors that influence advocacy outcomes.¹

Through these interviews, the coalitions consistently emphasized that CSN support in the network’s early days was essential to building basic capacities that positioned the coalitions for future success. Two examples illustrate how the CSN’s approach in this first cohort was effective: Alabama GRIT’s defense of the standards around the 2014 legislative session, and Expect More Achieve More Tennessee’s defense of the standards in 2014 after the state’s decision to drop its standards-aligned assessment.

CSN support enabled Alabama advocates to rally behind a leader and protect the standards in 2014

In the spring of 2014, the fight over high standards in Alabama rose to a fever pitch. The standards faced strong legislative challenges from Tea Party activists, generated by opposition to federal involvement in education, conspiracy theories about Common Core, and questionable academic arguments about standards.

A+ Education Partnership, a well-established education policy and best practices group, formalized the Alabama GRIT (Graduate Ready, Impact Tomorrow) coalition in 2013 as GRIT joined the CSN. The coalition included groups representing business, the military, civic leaders, educators, and parents. The 2014 legislative session was GRIT’s first test, with a raft of bills that sought to undermine the state’s commitment to high standards by returning to previous standards or allowing districts to choose their own standards.

GRIT educated coalition members about the importance of standing up for high standards before and during the legislative session, enabling its members to be more effective advocates. It launched a flurry of communications and coalition-building efforts, particularly focused on educating business members of the coalition who could in turn educate right-leaning legislators. It wrote summaries of the benefits of high standards to the workforce, launched social media campaigns to reach the grassroots, and encouraged people to call their legislators and attend public hearings. Ultimately, GRIT’s coalition members and allies persuaded legislators of the value of Alabama’s college- and career-ready standards. As Thomas Rains of A+ recounts, “GRIT isn’t a lobbying organization, but having the Business Council of Alabama (BCA) as a partner provided a great amount of muscle. BCA recognized the importance of high standards, and having them up to speed allowed them to work [effectively] in the statehouse.”

The CSN was integral to these efforts in multiple ways. First, the CSN enabled the coalition to hire a manager, proactively build capacity in advance of the legislative session, and develop a clear strategy. Rains says, “The grant process in 2013 really required us to sit down and think about what we wanted this coalition to be and what we wanted to do... and having an accountability partner helped us stick to it.” Second, Achieve experts, such as Chad Colby and Michael Gilligan, provided

¹ See Appendix A.

communications support that helped GRIT develop effective messaging and collateral. Rains recalls, “The ability to pick up the phone at any time and call the experts at Achieve was incredibly helpful... We had some skills, but the CSN gave us everything from templates to trainings.” Policy and technical expertise provided by the CSN also helped GRIT counter opponents who used inaccurate or misleading academic arguments against high standards with accurate, substantive rebuttals. Finally, the CSN supported the coalition’s outreach to expand its membership and allies. For example, Rains cited the CSN’s help connecting GRIT to ExxonMobil, a key player in Alabama who provided funding and who offered major clout with legislators, as a game-changer for the coalition.

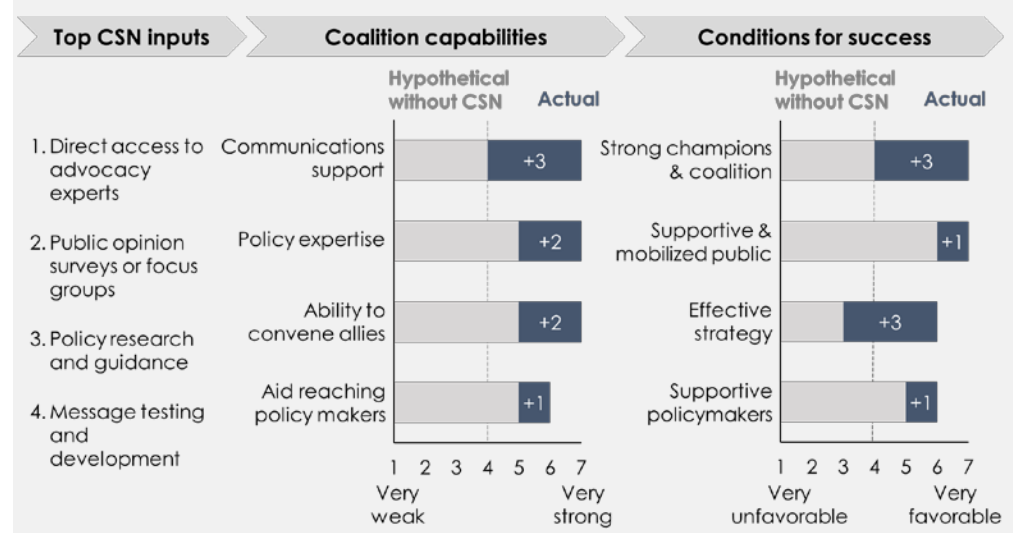
Figure 2 provides Rains’ structured reflections on the impact of the CSN. The “Top CSN inputs” column shows the four CSN resources that Rains rated as most useful. The “Coalition capabilities” column shows how Rains rated the coalition’s strengths on four key dimensions in the “Actual” reality with CSN support, as well as in a “Hypothetical” scenario had the CSN not provided support. Finally, the “Conditions for success” column shows how Rains rated the favorability of four key factors in advocacy outcomes, also in the “Actual” and “Hypothetical without CSN” scenarios. The top CSN inputs and areas where the difference between “Actual” and “Hypothetical without CSN” is the largest point to the CSN’s most significant contributions.

Alabama GRIT valued the access to expertise and data the CSN provided (Top CSN inputs) and used it to strengthen its capability to communicate effectively about technical policies with a range of allies (Coalition capabilities). Ultimately, this produced a stronger coalition and a more effective strategy that helped inform the public and policymakers (Conditions for success).

Figure 2

The CSN helped Alabama GRIT develop and execute evidence-based communications

Interviewee ratings of the usefulness of CSN tools and CSN contribution to outcomes



“While member organizations are the leaders in their respective states, the CSN provides us the opportunity to coordinate support, share best practices, and access additional resources.”
-Taylor Hall

The CSN helped Tennessee advocates develop new coalition-building and campaign skills to defend standards in 2014

Jared Bigham, the leader of the Tennessee Expect More, Achieve More coalition at that time, was at a CSN convening in Washington D.C. when he received a text with the news that Tennessee was planning to withdraw from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC had developed a high-quality assessment aligned with college- and career-ready standards, and the opponents who had successfully ended Tennessee’s participation in PARCC were also targeting repeal of the standards.

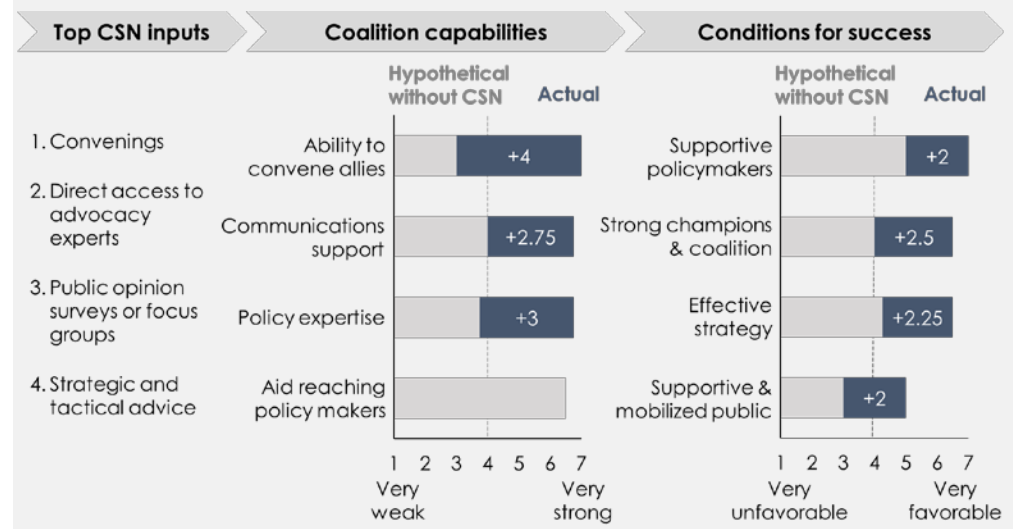
Bigham, a high school principal-turned-advocate working with the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), rallied the Tennessee Expect More, Achieve More coalition to address the challenge. In the following months, SCORE combined its Tennessee expertise with CSN resources to assemble a diverse advisory board of supporters, coordinate action by the over 400 coalition members, organize classroom and home visits for 134 policy makers, and coordinate superintendents to hold a press conference to publicly sign a letter in support of high academic standards. The Expect More, Achieve More coalition orchestrated responses to every anti-standards editorial in every newspaper in Tennessee, drawing on the CSN’s capacity to quickly create and publish op-eds. In the end, while Tennessee policymakers withdrew from PARCC, they overwhelmingly decided to continue to support high standards.

Current Expect More, Achieve More leader Taylor Hall credits the organization’s thoughtful partnership with the CSN for deepening the foundation that the coalition works from today: “While member organizations are the leaders in their respective states, the CSN provides us the opportunity to coordinate support, share best practices, and access additional resources.” The Expect More, Achieve More

Figure 3

Expect More, Achieve More Tennessee’s leadership learned from CSN peers and strategic counsel to educate policymakers

Interviewee ratings of the usefulness of CSN tools and CSN contribution to outcomes



Coalition strengthened and refined its strategy because of the partnership the CSN provided with other coalitions and national experts. The CSN's balanced approach to direction, flexibility, and accountability helped drive the coalition's success. Bigham reflected, "We were able to iterate on the changing landscape, and the CSN pressed us to push our thinking." Mary Cypress Metz of SCORE credited Michael Gilligan and emphasized the value of the CSN's structured networking opportunities: "[Before the CSN,] we were spending significant time collaborating with other states and coalitions in an ad hoc way. The CSN brought structure to the network to share best practices, discuss the issues we faced, and get guidance and feedback." Additionally, the CSN provided Tennessee advocates with communications support from national leaders such as Widmeyer Communications and The Fratelli Group, including social media content and message development. Three years later, Tennessee advocates continue to work with invaluable communications experts first introduced by the CSN. Figure 3 presents structured reflections from Bigham and Metz on the impact the CSN had on the coalition's capacity and the results of its advocacy.

CSN states provided a bulwark in the national defense of high standards

The network of CSN coalitions backstopped the standards reform movement and helped ensure that high standards won across the country. Success in Alabama and Tennessee in 2014 had not just local implications but also national influence. Alabama's coalition engaged powerful, national companies (like ExxonMobil), strengthening coalitions around the country. Tennessee's commitment to the standards provided a signal to Senator Lamar Alexander, incoming chairman of the

Figure 4

Each state coalition offered a positive contribution to the CSN's national influence

States grouped by type of influence and colored by when they joined the CSN



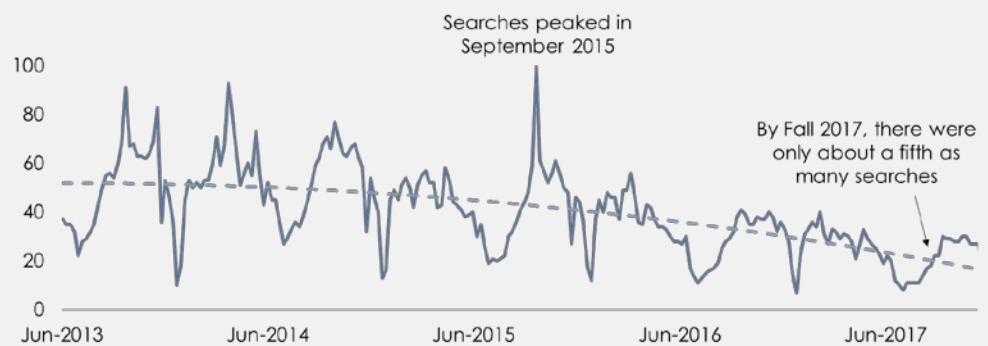
Senate’s Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, that the standards had bipartisan support in his home state. In all three iterations of the CSN’s growth, the CSN has focused on states not just based on in-state conditions, but also based on their importance to the national context (see Figure 4).

In part due to the CSN’s success, which maintained high standards in every member state, a vast majority of states across the US remain committed to high standards. For example, in the last few years, 24 states have conducted standards reviews, and 22 of those states have retained college- and career-ready standards in English Language Arts.² As standards have become secure, public interest in the standards—which spiked when Common Core became a political lightning rod—has declined, allowing states to shift focus to implementation (see Figure 5).

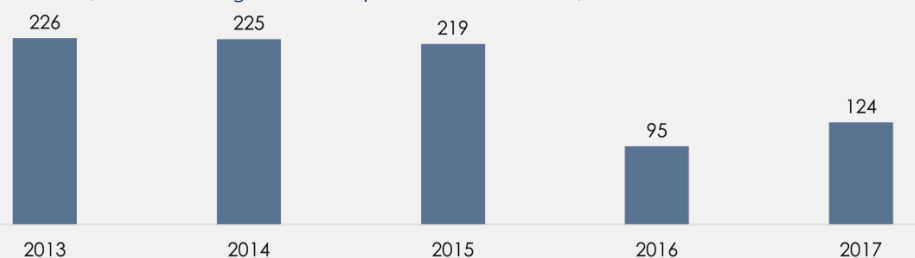
Figure 5

Political controversy over high standards has decreased over time

Number of Google searches for “Common Core” as percent of the peak number of searches



Number of state bills* referencing Common Core standards and “repeal,” “replace,” “ban,” or “prohibit” (Politico Pro Legislative Compass, 1/1/13-11/29/17)



*Some bills may contain these terms but not be Common Core repeal legislation (likely explaining the slight uptick in 2017). However, the overall trend reflects declining legislative interest in rolling back the standards.

² *Strong Standards: A Review of Changes to State Standards Since Common Core*, Achieve, November 13, 2017, <https://www.achieve.org/state-standards-remain-strong>.

Once policies are in place, the CSN enables sustainable implementation and innovation

With the standards in place and states launching new standards-aligned assessments, the CSN built on its experience and policy successes to tackle the growing challenge of implementing high standards. Advocates for high standards became embroiled in battles against anti-testing opponents as tests developed by two state consortia, Smarter Balanced and PARCC, were administered for the first time in spring 2015, following New York's first assessment intended to measure progress upon the new standards in 2013. Pushback against standards-aligned assessments was fueled by concerns like a perceived takeover of public education by corporations like major testing companies, fear of unfair consequences in teacher evaluation, and opposition to "teaching to the test."

The CSN now faced a diversifying set of challenges across its member states. For example, some states administered PARCC and others Smarter Balanced; teacher evaluations were a more salient issue in some states than others; and test refusal or "opt out" movements gained momentum in some states. Rather than stopping at policy defense, the CSN committed to the effective implementation of the hard-won standards. It sought to help states succeed on the implementation issues most important to their specific contexts. It also empowered coalitions to innovate as exemplars for each other and the rest of the country through the Innovate to Achieve grant program, which is illustrated in case studies below and described in greater detail in the final chapter of this report.

The CSN expanded to tackle new implementation challenges that grew out of the standards

Given the success of CSN 1.0 in defending high standards, the CSN retained the core tenets of the first-round application process. In recognition of the shifting advocacy context, however, it also sought states that were members of the PARCC or Smarter Balanced assessment consortia (Figure 6). By adding CSN 2.0 states, the CSN aimed to help states that required significant support for strong implementation of assessments, were on the frontlines of battles over high-quality assessments, had the capacity to use CSN resources effectively, and would set national trends.

Figure 6
The CSN evolved its view of strong coalitions

Primary factors for CSN 2.0



Washington (Ready Washington), Colorado (Climb Higher Colorado), Illinois (Real Learning for Real Life), New Hampshire (Reaching Higher New Hampshire), and New Jersey (We Raise New Jersey) joined the CSN through this expansion in November 2014.

CSN support helped states flexibly improve implementation and test new approaches

As states went deeper into implementation, the CSN had to build on the advocacy skills learned from narrowly targeted campaigns in defense of high standards to tackle new issues. States were entering uncharted territory. States were piloting new instructional materials and practices, and were administering brand new assessments that would reveal large gaps between high expectations and student achievement.

Member coalitions laud the CSN for its adaptability, commitment to seeing the standards through from policy to implementation, and continuous push for innovation. Two examples show the CSN's evolution and continued value: Climb Higher Colorado's family and community engagement partnership, and Ready Washington's development and refinement of its "Opt In" campaign, both of which were funded by the CSN's Innovate to Achieve program.

Colorado piloted and expanded family engagement efforts with support from the CSN's Innovate to Achieve program

As the standards shifted from abstract policies to classroom practices, it became clear that advocates had much work to do to engage not only policymakers and teachers, but also parents and students about the potential benefits of staying the course with high standards and aligned assessments. Parents needed the opportunity to learn how assessment data is valuable to their children and students to understand how the standards and assessments conjoin to provide a path to college and career readiness. Additionally, parents and classroom teachers were essential allies to push for strong implementation at the local level as advocates cannot operate in every district.

Reilly Pharo Carter became the new lead of the CSN member coalition, Climb Higher Colorado, in summer 2015, shortly after the coalition had successfully defeated 10+ pieces of legislation that sought to roll back the standards and assessments. While the coalition had won the defensive victory, Pharo Carter was eager to get "reflections from partners on how Climb Higher could make sure we don't get into that spot again." She led the coalition to launch a series of proactive actions, including talking with coalition partners to learn from the constituencies they serve—students, parents, and educators—and setting up policymakers on school tours in their districts. This work incorporated best practices and strategies from other CSN coalitions.

First, with strategic support from Nexus Policy Group, Climb Higher targeted 35 priority legislators across the state and political spectrum, and matched them with either educator fellows from America Achieves, a national partner to the CSN, or with schools screened on test participation, scores, and commitment to college and career readiness. Through school tours, these legislators built relationships with

knowledgeable constituents who helped them understand why strong implementation of the standards and assessments was important.

Second, Climb Higher had created an “Alliance” of four grassroots organizations, which included Denver Public Schools (DPS). Together, they held community focus groups to hear from and open a dialogue with parents, students, and teachers. Based on this work, Pharo Carter says, “We were able to refocus the conversation with policymakers from one focused on proposed policy repeal to one rooted in improving implementation based on the authentic feedback we were hearing from parents, students, and educators.” The results were a resounding success: the 2016 legislative session had fewer and less viable anti-standards and assessments bills. Yoni Dobie-Geffen, who worked in DPS at the time, added:

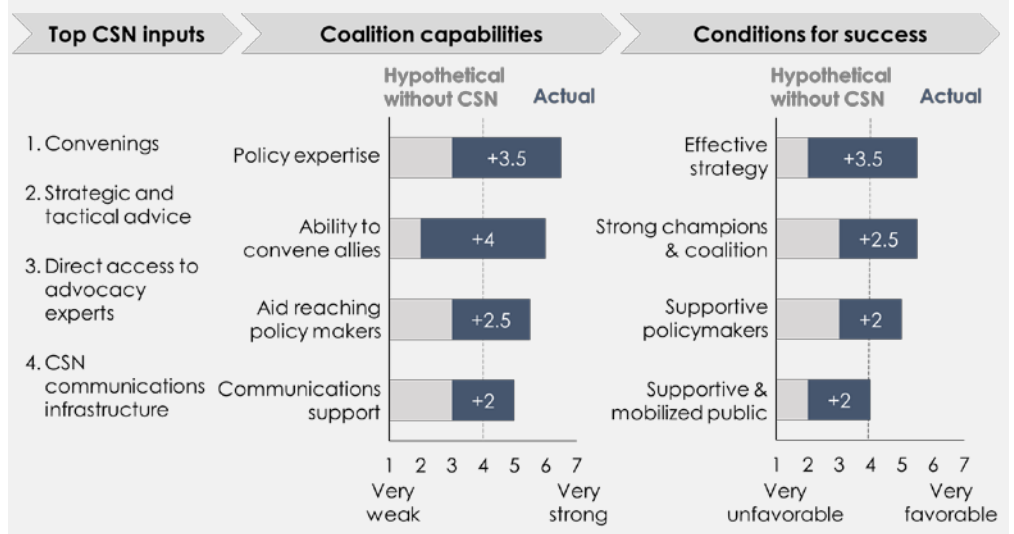
“The partnership with Climb Higher helped catalyze Denver Public Schools... [to] deepen and expand home visits, as well as align them to other forms of family engagement in pursuit of high-impact academic partnership between schools and parents. We [now aim to] build the leadership pipeline to get parents connected to policymakers so they drive the conversation in a more meaningful and authentic way. Without that partnership, I honestly don’t know whether we would have gotten to where we were. It enabled us to drive focus and accelerate that work.”

The CSN played an instrumental role in pushing Climb Higher to develop and pursue these innovative outreach programs. First, its funding was crucial. Thanks in large part to a pass-through grant from Climb Higher, which came from the CSN’s Innovate to Achieve program, DPS grew from 6,000 home visits by 59 schools three years ago to 11,000 home visits by 115 schools, the second-largest home visit program in the country. Second, the CSN pushed Climb Higher to “grow in numbers and perspectives.” Pharo Carter explains, “When you show up to CSN meetings and

Figure 7

The CSN encouraged and supported Climb Higher Colorado’s innovative outreach programs

Interviewee ratings of the usefulness of CSN tools and CSN contribution to outcomes



“The CSN heightened the importance of diverse partners, and helped make introductions we wouldn’t have had otherwise.”

-Reilly Pharo
Carter

you see other states have partners at the table, it throws down the challenge of ‘why don’t we have them at our table?’ The CSN heightened the importance of diverse partners, and helped make introductions we wouldn’t have had otherwise.” For instance, the CSN helped connect Climb Higher to local affiliates of UnidosUS and deepened Climb Higher’s relationship with the local Urban League. Figure 7 provides Pharo Carter’s structured reflections on how the CSN helped Climb Higher develop its capabilities and improve its strategy, strengthen champions, and reach policymakers and the public.

Ready Washington’s Opt In campaign demonstrates the CSN’s push to test and refine new ideas

In 2015, opposition to the Smarter Balanced assessment generated a shockingly high test refusal rate of nearly half of 11th graders across the state of Washington. Chris Barron, the lead of CSN coalition Ready Washington, knew the coalition needed to find a way to reframe the debate and demonstrate the value of the tests to students—especially since Washington had made major progress linking Smarter Balanced assessments to college admissions.

Through a series of grants and focus groups supported by the CSN, Barron learned that the biggest issue was lack of information for students. He decided to run an innovative student-centered social media campaign with support from Innovate to Achieve funding called “Opt In For Student Success,” which sought students to share personal stories about how the assessment benefitted them. In total, the campaign reached 1.5 million people in 2016 and corresponded with a decline in online discussion of the opt out movement on social media.³ Moreover, test refusal rates among 11th graders dropped to 11% in English Language Arts (ELA) compared to 42% in 2015, and 34% in math compared to 45% in 2015.

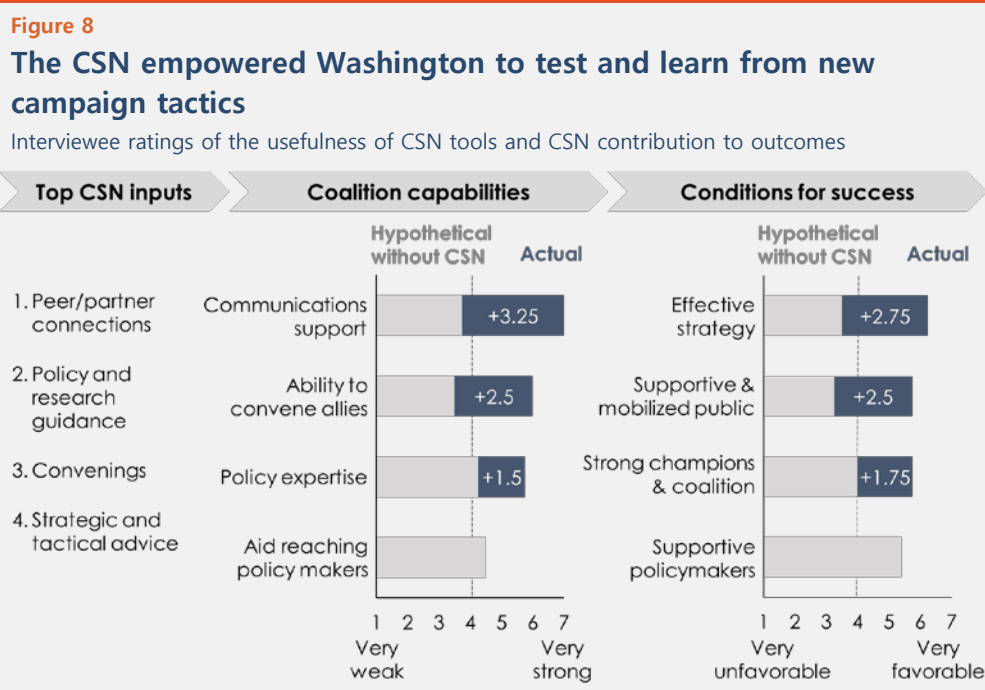
In late 2016, Ingrid Stegemoeller joined Ready Washington as the new coalition lead. Building on the 2016 communications materials, she re-ran the Opt In campaign in 2017 with changes based on the previous year: working through their network of students from 2016 to increase applications, featuring winners in professionally produced videos, launching the campaign earlier to secure content before the testing period, helping the winner place an op-ed, and focusing more on Instagram. In this second year, twice as many students entered the Opt In campaign, and opt out rates stayed lower than 2015. The Opt In campaign’s approach and the lessons learned – both about how to make it effective and its limits – were provided to and discussed with other CSN states, including New Hampshire, which subsequently launched its own student-focused online campaign.

The CSN’s ongoing investment in Ready Washington positioned the coalition to have the resources and expertise it needed to launch this innovative campaign. Barron said, “Ready Washington was a successful coalition [before the CSN], but the CSN brought it to a whole different level. We wouldn’t have been able to get the work

³ See Appendix B.

“The coalition has started to focus more on equity over the past year, and I attribute that largely to Achieve and the CSN.”
-Ingrid Stegemoeller

done that we did without the network.” Stegemoeller concurred, “The CSN made us the strong coalition we are and helped us earn a good reputation.” Moreover, the coalition has had a significant impact on Ready Washington’s agenda and approach. The Opt In campaign is one illustration of the CSN’s willingness to support something new and risky, invest in iteration even when a first round faced challenges, and relentlessly focus on results. Stegemoeller adds, “[CSN] convenings have influenced us, especially around equity. The coalition has started to focus more on equity over the past year, and I attribute that largely to Achieve and the CSN.” With the strong reputation and partnerships formed over years of CSN support, Stegemoeller believes that Ready Washington will succeed even as education issues shift and the coalition adds members with different interests. She recounts, “Even through differences of opinion on various education policy and funding issues, people continue to recognize the importance of the coalition, and politics generally stay out of the Ready Washington room.” Figure 8 shows structured reflections from Barron and Stegemoeller about the CSN’s impact on the coalition’s Opt In campaign efforts.



CSN work helped the standards stay strong and pushed states to improve assessments across the country

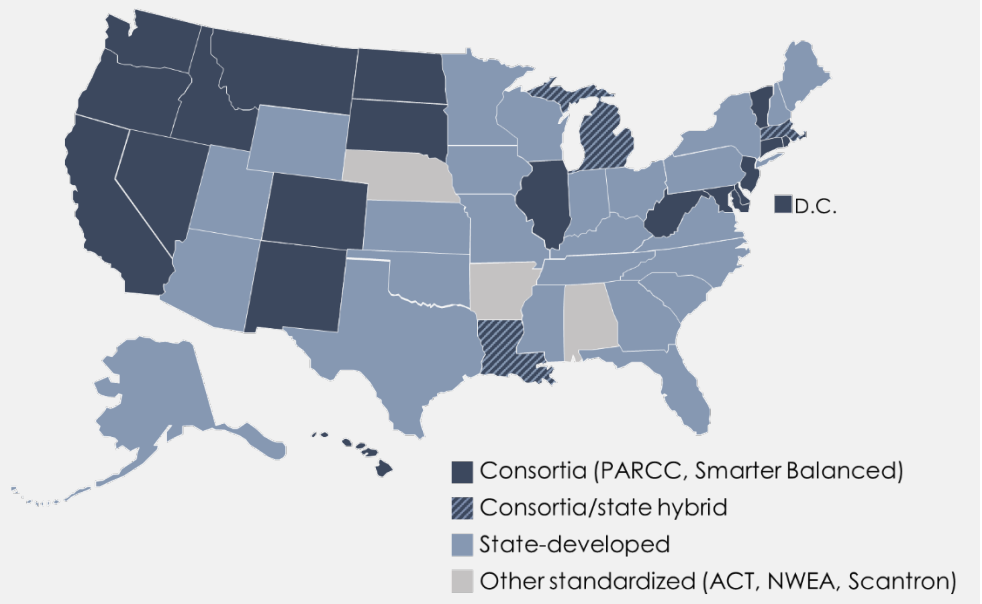
While the CSN’s top priority through 2015 was defense of standards and assessments in member states, the network continued to support national progress. Through its selection of states using a mix of PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and state-specific tests, it was able to test strategies and tactics in a variety of contexts and model creative approaches to policy and political challenges for the rest of the country. As Figure 9

shows, though Smarter Balanced and PARCC lost some members, the consortia won many continued commitments, and all states complied with the federal requirement for annual assessments in grades 3-8. During the 2017-2018 school year, 19 states and the District of Columbia remain in the consortia, three states use consortia test items within their state tests, and others chose different testing options intended to measure how well students meet the demands of college- and career-ready standards, such as New York's, Massachusetts', and Tennessee's state-developed assessments.

Figure 9

Nearly half of states use PARCC, Smarter Balanced, or consortia test items, and all states continue to administer annual assessments in grades 3-8

State math and ELA standardized assessments for grades 3-8 in the 2017-2018 school year (Achieve data)



CSN 2.0 pushed the CSN to expand its goals and capacities beyond focused advocacy for a single issue, think strategically about long-term implementation to turn policy victories into on-the-ground change, and double down on its push for innovation.

In times of rapid change, the CSN helps coalitions evolve and become more representative

In December of 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the reauthorization of federal education legislation. By the summer of 2016, education advocates were in the thick of state ESSA plan development, which added school accountability and transparency of student outcomes to their priority issues. With standards largely stable and assessments beginning to settle, the CSN seized the opportunity to help states tackle the new equity and accountability challenges they were facing.

The CSN chose its third cohort as state coalitions diversified their priorities and constituencies

ESSA came at the same time the national conversation around education was changing. Common Core opponents were exhausted, and partisans were gearing up for the 2016 presidential election. The national education debate was ceding ground to myriad detailed state-based conversations about ESSA plans.

To succeed in this increasingly state-driven context, the CSN realized it needed to give members even more flexibility to address state-specific needs and opportunities. With that in mind, the selection criteria for CSN 3.0 broadened the issues on which coalitions could make the case for support, while maintaining the commitment to overall college- and career-ready goals (Figure 10). It removed the condition that states be in an assessment consortia and allowed states to be committed to any college- and career-ready-aligned assessment. It began to seek states with opportunities to increase the transparency of student outcomes, a major issue under ESSA. It also recognized the need to continue expanding the stakeholders and perspectives represented by coalitions, and asked that coalitions seek to represent “special populations” who may have been previously left out of the room, such as special education, college access, and informal educator groups.

Figure 10
The CSN’s view of strong coalitions has shifted based on experience and context

Primary factors for CSN 3.0



Based on these selection criteria, California (California Alliance for Continuous Improvement), Georgia (Better Standards for a Better Georgia), and New York (High Achievement New York) joined the CSN, while North Carolina, Michigan, and New Jersey cycled out.

The CSN is helping make coalitions more resilient to internal and external change

By CSN 3.0, the coalitions had matured and the issues on which they worked had changed. CSN members expressed deep appreciation for the CSN's long-term commitment to their success, which helped ensure they had the necessary capacity and reputation to take on new issues. In addition, many coalition leaders credited the CSN with providing strategic continuity and resources and training for new leaders. Ohio's work on ESSA stakeholder engagement and several states' leadership transitions illustrate the CSN's value in times of change.

Ohio's strong ESSA engagement efforts were bolstered by a foundation the CSN helped build

The Ohio Standard, a CSN coalition, held monthly coalition meetings which included the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). As the state's ESSA plan was being drafted, ODE provided updates on ESSA progress. Coalition partners realized that ODE's ESSA outreach efforts were reaching education stakeholder associations in the capitol, but needed to also get outside Columbus and meet parents, educators, principals, and superintendents in the field.

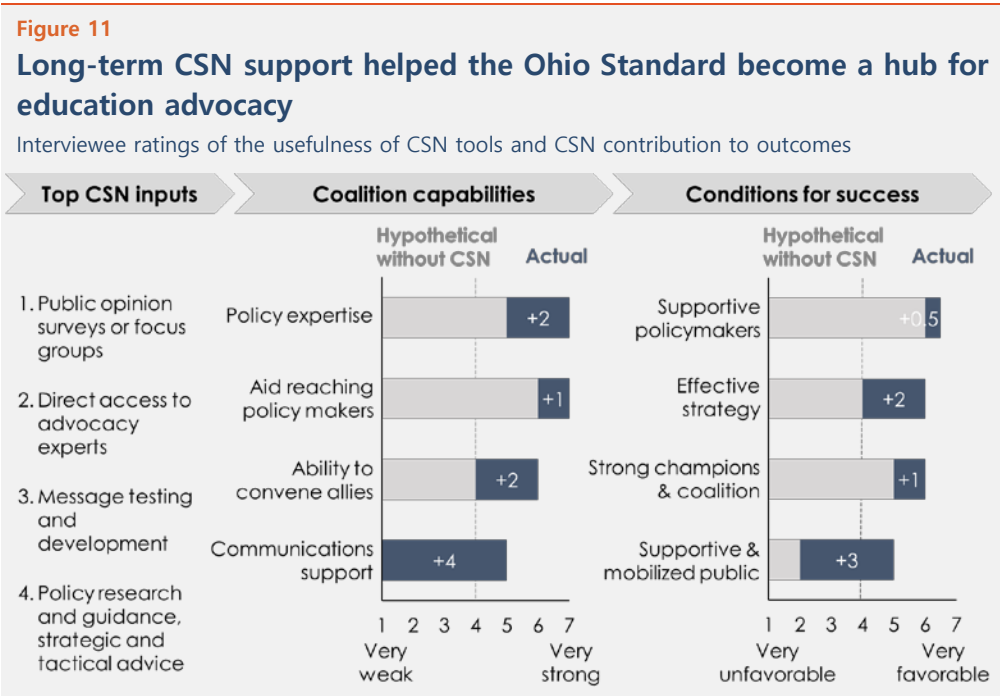
Stakeholders who wished to expand ESSA engagement sought The Ohio Standard's help, as the coalition was seen as a hub for education policy advocacy. Given limited ODE capacity, The Ohio Standard and its leader, Lisa Gray, offered to help organize community meetings in partnership with the department. With support from coalition member Philanthropy Ohio to reach communities, all coalition members to distribute invitations, and ODE staff to identify priority geographies, The Ohio Standard organized ten regional meetings across the state. Each meeting drew hundreds of people, and superintendent Paolo DeMaria attended each one. State board members and legislators also joined, which gave the legislature an opportunity to engage in the ESSA planning process in their local communities. Following the meetings, The Ohio Standard consolidated the feedback and presented it to the State Board of Education.

The result was a community-driven frame around the ESSA plan and broader state education strategy, which went beyond standards, assessments, and the technical aspects of the ESSA plan. Community members called for the state to think more deeply about "how do you support schools to do this difficult work?", raising issues like family environments and poverty, early childhood investments, and community schools and wraparound services.

While the CSN was less involved in the day-to-day work around the ESSA meetings than they previously had been around standards and assessments advocacy, Gray said,

“Without the CSN funding and the support around communications and policy, we would not exist.”
-Lisa Gray

“Without the CSN funding and the support around communications and policy, we would not exist” as a resource for ODE, coalition members, or the community. She credited the CSN’s range of services from bolstering social media to writing op-eds to connecting her to peers and allies for enabling The Ohio Standard’s success. As The Ohio Standard considers what is next for the coalition, Gray appreciates that the CSN set the coalition up to play an essential role in connecting diverse grassroots voices with policymakers, regardless of the particular issue at hand. Figure 11 presents Gray’s structured feedback on how the CSN prepared the coalition for the new challenges presented by ESSA planning.



The CSN has provided continuity and helped new coalition leaders quickly get up to speed and build new skills

Strong leadership is essential to successful advocacy coalitions.⁴ Leaders provide strategic direction, hold relationships with key partners and decision makers, and learn coalition-building and advocacy skills through experience. As a result, advocacy coalitions risk loss of power or even dissolution if they do not handle leadership transitions well.

The CSN played an essential role in supporting new coalition leaders with training, communications and advocacy materials, and strategic advice, enabling many coalition leaders to serve long multi-year terms (e.g., Alabama GRIT’s founding leader served from 2013 to 2017) and to stay connected with the CSN after changing roles. The CSN has helped several coalitions through leadership and staff transitions. For example, Taylor Hall of Expect More, Achieve More Tennessee says, “In addition to

⁴ See, e.g., “strong campaign leader(s)” in Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau, “Assessing Advocacy,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2013, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/assessing_advocacy.

“Being part of the network enabled the coalition to keep going at a time of transition.”
-Ingrid Stegemoeller

the benefit of interacting with peers through CSN convenings, utilizing CSN staff as a resource to share best practices from other states and to ensure our successes are also shared with other states has helped strengthen our capacity as advocacy leaders, particularly during leadership transitions within our coalition.”

Ingrid Stegemoeller of Ready Washington concurred that CSN resources were vital for her as she joined the coalition’s work midstream: “For me, coming in and having a network of other people doing the work and having others support me was invaluable. It was a pretty steep learning curve on state-specific issues but also the standards and assessments landscape generally. Being part of the network enabled the coalition to keep going at a time of transition.”

The CSN has also provided valuable continuity through short-term staff changes. In Arizona, for example, the CSN provided public relations support during a crucial time when key staff were on leave, which contributed to Expect More Arizona’s overall successful effort to ensure Arizona maintained rigorous standards. As time goes on, more coalitions will undergo staff and leadership transitions, and the CSN’s institutional memory and resources can serve as a reliable gap-filler.

The CSN is poised to build states’ strategic resilience and to help maintain national advocacy momentum

CSN 3.0 expanded the CSN’s abilities to organize states pursuing diverse priorities, laying the groundwork for effective nationwide efforts in an increasingly state-driven context. The network learned how to provide targeted support while also seeking commonality across states. For example, to continue to influence national outcomes, the CSN added New York as a member because it was an early leader on assessments, a battleground for test refusal, and a large media market that influences national trends.

Going forward, the CSN will continue to seek opportunities to support states who are testing new tactics and issues, and to prepare advocates for long-term success. Its relentless focus on continuous coalition-building and leadership development sets it apart from other efforts to build advocacy networks.

These capabilities position the CSN as a flexible force for sustaining change in education

The CSN has built comprehensive and flexible capacities to achieve progress

While the CSN began with a narrow focus on defending college- and career-ready standards, it has grown its expertise and interests over time based on the needs of its members and national trends. Its approach has helped transcend one of the major issues philanthropy faces in funding advocacy efforts: **How can funders focus their resources on the most pressing battles, while also ensuring that advocates are adequately prepared to handle new issues when they arise?**

The CSN's long-term support has helped coalitions proactively prepare for policy debates and sustain positive momentum

The CSN was indispensable to helping coalitions do the hard work of growing their memberships, skills, and relationships from infancy to maturity, and maintaining an open mindset of testing and learning even in maturity. The CSN made long-term investments in coalitions that showed early promise, with the recognition that they needed to provide tangible funding and resources to help those coalitions build their capacity and power.

Without consistent and flexible support over time, the coalitions would have risked breaking apart after near-term battles ended. This would have left them scrambling to regroup when the next big challenge arose. It would have also missed the opportunity to continue strengthening relationships, building skills, and applying lessons learned between peak advocacy periods—work that helps sustain a true, dynamic movement for education equity, rather than temporary partnerships of necessity that just “check the box” for engagement, particularly with underrepresented groups.

The CSN's approach to selecting coalitions factored in those states facing major, urgent advocacy fights. At the same time, the CSN provided flexible funding for general support that allowed coalitions to continue operating outside of those key moments of pitched battles. It pressed coalitions to invest their resources not only in defeating near-term challenges, but also in laying the groundwork to proactively seize longer-term opportunities. This helped ensure that coalitions could hold the line against immediate threats, prepare for new challenges that might arise, and create and seize windows of opportunity for positive progress.

CSN support is tailored to states' particular needs and priorities

The CSN has built unique capacities and relationships that position it to extend vital support to diverse state coalitions going forward. Its work through 2017 proved its ability to organize states pursuing diverse priorities, positioning the CSN to continue

The CSN made long-term investments in coalitions that showed early promise.

providing effective nation-wide support in an increasingly state-driven context. At the same time, it has honed its ability to support states during targeted policy battles.

The network provided personalized support while also seeking commonality across states. Figure 12, which shows typologies of CSN states based on their reported activities and audiences for external engagement, illustrates how the CSN embraced states' individual needs as they emphasized different tactics and targeted different key audiences. At the same time, states pursuing similar strategies were able to leverage shared resources, and states with different approaches could look to other groups to determine whether there were new approaches worth testing in their context.

Figure 12

The CSN supported the state coalitions in ways to match their needs

States grouped by areas they disproportionately focused versus other states

Types of activities

More focus on **media**



More focus on **internal strategy and fundraising**



More focus on **partner engagement**



Targets of external engagement*

More focus on **media and others**



More focus on **parents, educators, and business**



Heavy focus on **policymakers**



*CA, NY, GA, and NH not shown due to data availability

Now, with the passage of ESSA and the new federal administration's push to increase state and local control of education, the CSN is continuing to strengthen its capacity to support specific policy priorities across member states while providing cross-state infrastructure and shared resources. In a state-driven era, the CSN's work to strengthen connections between states so they can share lessons, get input on strategies, and hold each other accountable is essential to hold together a national commitment to college and career readiness and equitable student outcomes. CSN leaders recount that these people-driven connections that go beyond any specific tools or resources have been essential to the network's cohesiveness and value.

The CSN serves as a reminder that the work of coalition-building and maintenance is not easy, but is essential to long-term success, and must continually keep equity and inclusion at the forefront.

Going forward, the CSN's support and strategic guidance will be more important than ever

Public education faces a new wave of change, including both opportunities and challenges, in the era of ESSA and the new federal administration. While battles over standards and assessments have largely stabilized, funders and advocates must gear up for “the next big thing.” In some states, it remains to be seen what the next major issue will be; in others, policy debates have already accelerated. Alliances built around the bipartisan issue of high standards are at risk of fracturing when advocates look to more contentious priorities. In this environment, the CSN is a crucial strategic player.

As coalitions consider potential priorities, the CSN can help inform and sharpen their agendas

The CSN is a network of diverse, broad-based state advocacy coalitions who collectively seek common ground to improve the educational prospects for all children. These coalitions have come together to promote promising policies, practices, and strategies by engaging impacted stakeholders, respecting diverse viewpoints, and embracing dialogue. Inherent in the CSN is the belief that the network should be guided by its diverse state- and community-based members. Therefore, the network will promote national, state, and local innovation within the unique political and policy contexts of each community, and does not seek to be overly centralized and directive.

At the same time, the CSN serves as a sounding board for coalitions as they develop and implement their strategies. The CSN can help coalitions set goals, identify solutions that will improve student outcomes, develop and refine tactics, and remain accountable to their commitments to engage diverse stakeholders. While coalitions are in the often long process of determining their next major strategies, the CSN can help push them to continue seizing active opportunities and testing innovations that are consistent with their mission, rather than stagnating or dissolving in the face of strategic uncertainty. The CSN serves as a reminder to coalitions that the work of coalition-building and maintenance is not easy, but is essential to long-term success, and must continually keep equity and inclusion at the forefront. The trust the CSN has built over years of experience and investment in relationships gives it unique credibility and real value to offer advocates.

The CSN's diverse capabilities will continue to be essential for states pursuing varied advocacy agendas and tactics

Going forward, the CSN offers a unique, battle-tested set of four relevant skills and resources for the field:

1. Expertise to bridge policy nuances with public priorities;
2. Connections between state-level advocates and national actors in an increasingly splintered advocacy environment;

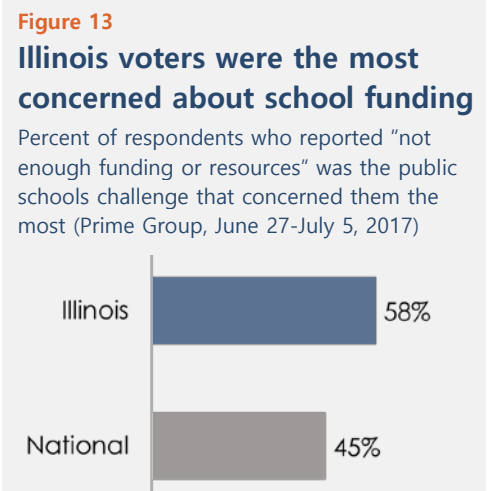
The CSN not only pursues discrete policy changes, but aims to support a broad movement for education equity by building public buy-in.

3. Communications expertise and resources; and
4. Innovative, replicable programs to support advocacy and implementation.

These skills have proven to be relevant when states are pursuing the same set of policy goals, like standards during the CSN’s early years, as well as when states are pursuing multiple goals simultaneously, such as when states began to diverge on approaches to assessments and accountability plans. Moreover, the network’s overarching ability to connect people and establish forums for sharing and accountability complement these specific tools.

First, the CSN can help bridge policy nuances with stakeholder priorities. With their years of experience, the CSN’s state coalitions are intimately familiar with state-level policy priorities for lawmakers and advocates. The CSN also conducts research to understand what issues are top-of-mind to public audiences that are essential to grassroots advocacy, such as parents and educators. Through this combination of insights into policy debates and stakeholder interests, the CSN can help state coalitions select and frame issues that are high priority for both the public and policymakers so coalitions can create and seize windows for progress. With this mindset, the CSN not only pursues discrete policy changes, but aims to support a broad movement for education equity by building public buy-in.

The work of CSN member Advance Illinois on the Illinois school funding formula illustrates the importance of this work. Equitable funding became a top priority for Illinois education advocates and policymakers, particularly given continuing statewide budget issues. CSN research found that school funding disproportionately galvanized the public in Illinois compared to other states, suggesting that there was a real window of opportunity for Advance Illinois to leverage broad support to secure policy change (Figure 13). Ultimately, Advance Illinois built a large and diverse “Fix the Formula” coalition that won landmark policy changes to improve equitable funding.



Second, the CSN fosters connections between state-level advocates and national actors in an increasingly splintered advocacy environment. By working across states, the CSN helps identify common agendas and relevant information states can share to ensure that college- and career-ready priorities are collectively progressing at the national level. Even if funders and advocates have differing policy priorities, they share the goal of equitable access to college and careers, and benefit from continued dialogue to identify opportunities for collaboration. The CSN provides a vibrant cross-state infrastructure in the form of regular check-ins, convenings, webinars, and

The Innovate to Achieve (I2A) program incubates new ideas, pushing coalitions to use design thinking to develop approaches that will speak to stakeholders and decision makers on the ground.

online discussion forums. It also cultivates personal familiarity between coalition staff that opens the door for coalitions to communicate informally on a regular basis. Beyond CSN members, the CSN leveraged access to a range of content, policy, and advocacy partners to serve participating coalitions. Groups ranging from Be A Learning Hero to UnidosUS to America Achieves, amongst a host of other organizations, all benefitted from partnership with the CSN to have a distribution and dissemination channel with both state- and local-level coalitions that could readily share their information – as well as provide beneficial feedback on materials, outreach, and strategy. Interviews with coalition leads revealed that these connections with peers and partners were the most useful aspect of the CSN (Figure 14).

Third, the CSN offers communications expertise and resources that lift some of the burden for capacity-limited state advocates to create their own materials, and provides strategic guidance on how to make state materials more effective. Its communications resources include message testing and development, communications training, tactical advice

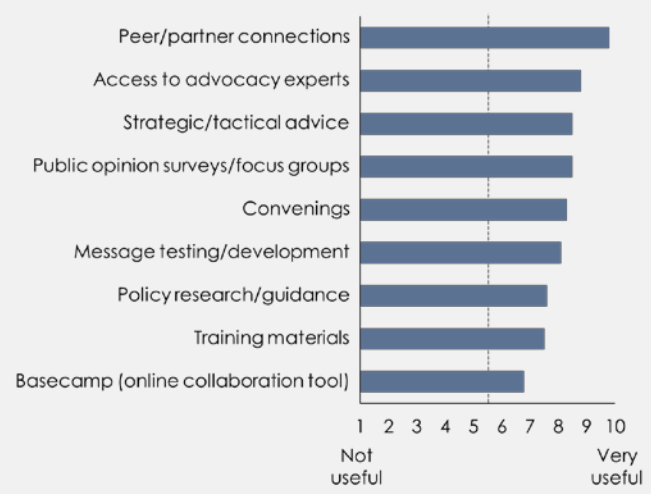
on how to build successful communications campaigns, and transcreation services to help communications reach diverse audiences. Coalition leads rated these resources as very useful (Figure 14), noting that although they adapted materials to fit their state contexts, having a starting point from the national perspective and creative examples from other states made their state work more efficient.

Finally, the CSN created innovative, replicable programs to support advocacy and implementation. The Innovate to Achieve (I2A) program awards competitive grants to CSN members seeking funding for innovative, replicable, game-changing advocacy, communications, and policy implementation ideas. It incubates new ideas, pushing coalitions to use design thinking to develop approaches that will speak to stakeholders and decision makers on the ground, and to commit to executing their strategies. It creates feedback loops that improve and replicate those ideas. By pushing advocates to test sometimes risky strategies and to report failures as well as successes, I2A has helped individual coalitions evolve their strategies. In addition, it provides the opportunity for coalitions to apply other coalitions' ideas within their unique context, advancing coalition-wide learning through iteration and identifying common threads across the country. As described in the Colorado home visits and

Figure 14

Coalitions value all the CSN's tools

Average interviewee rating of usefulness



Washington Opt In campaign case studies under CSN 2.0, this program has led to some of the coalitions' greatest tactical advances and implementation successes.

Spinning off into an independent organization will amplify the CSN's mission, flexibility, and impact

The CSN was originally conceived by Achieve leaders in 2012 as a vehicle to elevate voices of support across states with national influence in service of higher standards. Since CSN 1.0, the work has evolved as CSN coalitions have addressed additional challenges to standards-based reforms as well as public education more broadly. Significantly, the coalitions' value has shifted from transactional advocacy on one policy (to secure higher standards) to movement building in service of equitable education for all—a remit broader than Achieve's core mission of standards-based education reform.

As a result, the CSN, with the enthusiasm of its member coalitions, is preparing to spin off from Achieve as a separate organization called Seek Common Ground. As an independent organization with the CSN's core staff, Seek Common Ground should be able to deliver all the value of the CSN, and be free to maximize its impact across a broader swath of the education improvement policy agenda. In its new form, Seek Common Ground can continue to provide the resources, practices, innovation grants, and peer learning environment that made the CSN successful and valuable to state coalitions. At the same time, it will have greater flexibility to secure funding for and support policies that stakeholders in states identify as crucial in their context, deepening local grassroots and grass-tops engagement. And it will gain the option to expand to coalitions that may not have been on the frontlines on higher standards, but are in the vanguard on other crucial policy issues. Finally, Seek Common Ground will benefit from a backbone staff that does not face competing priorities on other Achieve projects, and can focus solely on state coalition leaders.

Seek Common Ground will remain unique in the field due to its rigorous expectations for coalition strategies, leadership, goals, innovation, authentic engagement, and shared learning. Its members are themselves comprised of local and state coalitions and groups, which enables Seek Common Ground to find shared agendas between other advocates and coalitions who may have narrower or divergent policy goals. This work will continue to be essential as states strive to build support for public education by advancing policies, practices, and strategies that will improve outcomes for all students.

* * *

Even as funders and advocates strive for similar high-quality policies and programs across states, the politics that enable or stymie policy change vary significantly state to state. To make national progress requires united, state-based coalitions that understand local contexts, are committed to doing the right thing for students, and hold the right relationships. Seek Common Ground can serve as that crucial resource for and bridge between state advocates.

Learn more

To learn more about the CSN's work and its relaunch as Seek Common Ground, please visit <https://seekcommonground.org/> or email Info@SeekCommonGround.org.

You may also contact the CSN core staff who will lead Seek Common Ground at:

- Sandy Boyd, sandy@seekcommonground.org
- Michael Gilligan, michael@seekcommonground.org
- Claudia Quintero, claudia@seekcommonground.org

Appendix A: Factors that influence advocacy outcomes

In November 2017, we conducted interviews with CSN members to understand how and to what extent the CSN contributed to landmark state coalition victories. As part of these interviews, we asked coalition leaders to rate the impact of the CSN on a set of factors that influence advocacy outcomes:

- **Dynamic master plan:** The coalition had a flexible strategy with multiple pathways, and continuously updated its strategy to pursue what would be effective;
- **Strong lead champions and influential support coalition:** Advocates had a strong strategy, resources, and relationships with decision-makers;
- **Supportive and mobilized public:** Supporters of college- and career-ready efforts were active, and opposition was not mobilized; and
- **Powerful inside champions:** State and local policymakers backed college- and career-ready standards and assessments.

These factors were identified through the synthesis of political science and practice research and years of engaging with a wide range of advocates, academics, and foundations. The research was described extensively in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and has since been adopted widely in the field.⁵ The framework outlines nine conditions leading researchers and practitioners view as essential to successful policy campaigns. The four we asked coalition leaders to rate in the interviews are those that advocates generally have the greatest power to directly influence (in contrast to contextual and structural factors).

As a result, improvements the coalition leaders reported in the favorability of these four factors highlight where the CSN is likely to have contributed meaningfully to policy defense and implementation.

⁵ Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau, “Assessing Advocacy,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2013, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/assessing_advocacy.

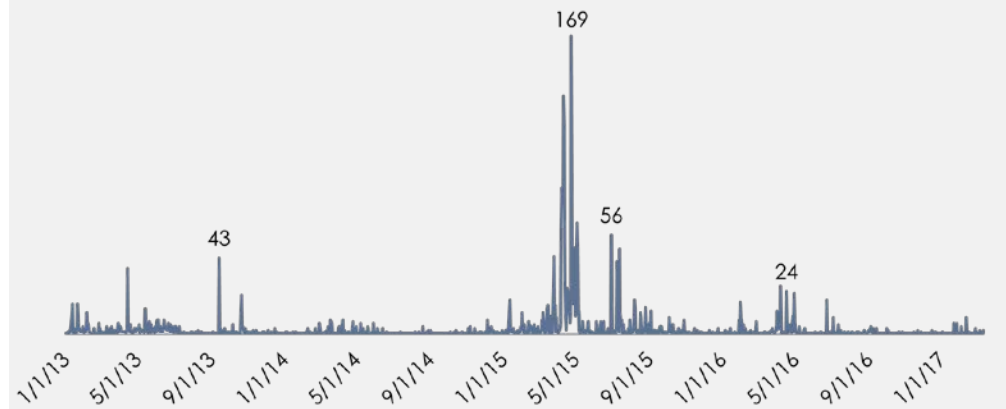
Appendix B: Test refusal social media in Washington

Figure B1 shows the daily volume of Twitter posts about test refusal in Washington. There was a major spike in social media conversation about test refusal, or the “opt out movement,” in 2015. This is consistent with the high test refusal rates among 11th graders that year.

Figure B1

Social media discussion of test refusal spiked in 2015

Number of posts about opt out in Washington (Crimson Hexagon, 1/1/13-3/1/17; primarily Twitter data with minimal Facebook data from public posts)



Opt out garnered social media interest in 2015 thanks to a grassroots movement centered on Seattle high schools with high opt-out rates. An anti-testing movement in Washington predated the Common Core-aligned assessment, but was picked up by national anti-testing advocates as a trailblazer in the push against Common Core-aligned tests. Jesse Hagopian, a long-time testing opponent, was the key leader in a fairly integrated social media conversation, supported by United Opt Out, the Badass Teachers, and Diane Ravitch. Although the teachers union did not endorse opt out, the movement gained credibility from the backing of local civil rights groups, such as the Seattle NAACP, and included many non-union educator voices.

With the Opt In campaign and other efforts to support high-quality assessments, social media conversation about test refusal shrank in subsequent years, alongside decreased test refusal rates on the ground.