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Preparing Teachers for the Common Core

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD FEB. 28, 2014

The panel convened by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to review New York's troubled rollout of the Common Core learning standards will present its recommendations this spring. Among its most important tasks is to offer ways to remedy the most serious weakness in the state's Common Core effort — the shortage of high-quality programs that are supposed to train teachers to carry out new Common Core-based curriculums.

The Common Core standards, which have been adopted by all but a handful of states, are new goals for what children should learn from one grade to the next. They are intended to move schools away from passive learning and fill-in-the-bubble tests and toward a writing-intensive curriculum that cultivates reasoning skills earlier than is now common. In practice, this means teaching fifth graders to write essays in which they introduce, support and defend arguments, using specific facts and details.

New York, which adopted the standards in 2010, is one of the first states to create extensive Common Core-based curriculum materials and training kits. The problem is that many teachers in New York have not been given the time or the help they need to develop an understanding of the Common Core idea or to master the skills needed to teach it. This failure stems partly from the financial struggles of many districts. Some were actually cutting staff and reducing services to students as the Common Core was being rolled out; they had no money to devote to professional development. Even if the money had been available, professional development programs vary widely in

quality from one district to another.

The goal should be to end old-fashioned training sessions where teachers attend conferences at which they listen to lectures for a few days a year and move toward continuous instruction by master educators who observe teachers at work, providing help and feedback.

The Common Core initiative cannot succeed unless these problems are solved. That point was hammered home at the panel's first public hearing last week. An expert speaking at the hearing, Carmel Martin, a former assistant secretary of education in the Obama administration, noted that other states had invested heavily in teacher development as part of their preparation in rolling out the Common Core. These programs give teachers the time to learn new instructional techniques either during the summer, after school, or by reducing teachers' course loads during the school year.

California allocated \$1.25 billion in the current school year for carrying out the new standards. The Tennessee Department of Education trained more than 40,000 teachers — roughly two-thirds of the state teacher corps — during 2012 and 2013. The training sessions were led by top teachers who were selected through a competition. And Delaware has created a project called Common Ground for the Common Core that helps schools and districts bring the new standards into classrooms.

New York can help local districts by providing money and laying out rigorous guidelines for how it can be used. The state Board of Regents, which oversees education policy, clearly had that in mind when it advised the Legislature to increase school aid by \$1.3 billion in the 2014-15 school year. About half of that — \$719 million — would go toward helping districts that are still reeling from state funding cuts related to the recession and a state-imposed tax cap that limited their ability to raise money. And \$125 million would go to an instructional development fund that would be available to districts that committed to extensive, high-quality professional development. The money would be allocated based on need.

The Legislature would do well to follow the Regents'

recommendations. If New York wants to install the Common Core and improve the quality of education it will need to put its money where its mouth is.

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