ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS educational improvement projects in recent years was the adoption of new, more rigorous college- and career-ready academic standards by more than 40 U.S. states. Though the Common Core label has suffered greatly from a populist backlash (see “Common Core Brand Taints Opinion on Standards,” features, Winter 2017), the reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated. The standards themselves remain largely intact, even in states that have renamed and tweaked them. The aligned PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests are also still in place in more than half of the states that adopted them. Despite the controversy, most U.S. states have raised the bar for what it means for students to be on track for success (see “After Common Core, States Set Rigorous Standards,” features, Summer 2016).

That’s all well and good, but what really matters is whether higher standards and tougher tests lead to positive changes in the classroom. And this is where there is still a ton of important, if unsexy, work to be done. As late as October 2016—more than six years after the first wave of states adopted the standards—fewer than one in five teachers said their instructional materials were well aligned to the Common Core, according to a national Education Week survey.

That’s a problem. A growing body of evidence indicates that the choice of a strong, aligned curriculum can have outsized impacts on student learning. In a 2012 review, Matthew Chingos and Grover Whitehurst found “strong evidence that the choice of instructional materials has large effects on student learning—effects that rival in size those that are associated with differences in teacher effectiveness.” A recent study by Cory Koedel and Morgan Polikoff of California math textbooks found similar effects.

The fast-moving adoption of Common Core was an unprecedented disruption to a curriculum and textbook market that’s long been dominated by a few major publishers. This is an area where reformers and foundations could make a big difference, by helping put new, high-quality instructional materials into teachers’ hands. This won’t require passing any new laws or enacting additional regulations. But it will take leadership and the willingness to support entrepreneurs working to develop resources that can address teachers’ needs. The story of Eureka Math offers hope, and something of a roadmap.
school teachers in Common Core states reported using EngageNY at least once a week, more than any other math program, and 13 percent said they used Eureka Math.

Great Minds’ pitch is that teachers and scholars specifically designed Eureka Math in response to the new standards, and the nonprofit curriculum reviewer EdReports.org has found it is well aligned. Unlike some other popular programs, Eureka Math doesn’t overlook the need to develop students’ fluency with mathematical procedures, especially in the early years. Elementary students are expected to know their addition and multiplication facts, for example, and practice them frequently. Another RAND analysis found that Eureka Math is particularly popular in Louisiana—where state officials strongly recommend its use—and speculated that it might help to explain the state’s impressive achievement gains of late.

On the surface, the lesson seems simple: if you build a great curriculum and make it available for free on the Internet, teachers will flock to it. That’s certainly what I heard from the organization’s president, Lynne Munson.

“What we create are knowledge-rich instructional materials that are worthy of study,” she said. “Not scripts, but lessons that will reward teachers’ close reading and collaboration.”

To be sure, Great Minds holds high expectations for what teachers are capable of, and teachers have rewarded it with their enthusiasm for its curriculum. But crucially, its materials are of high quality, in part because its start-up budget was consider-