

Support for a Big Opportunity: Transitioning to the Common Core State Standards

Schools and districts that are putting a Common Core State Standards–based curriculum into place are in the midst of “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reexamine their teaching practices,” says WestEd’s Robert Rosenfeld. He calls the effort nothing less than a “game changer.”

Adds Rosenfeld’s colleague, Liz Jameyson, “The standards are based on the best educational research we have. We have good reason to believe this will work. People are sitting up and taking notice.”

Rosenfeld, Jameyson, and other members of WestEd’s Local Accountability Professional Development Series (LAPDS) are working with educators in more than a dozen states, using strategies honed over the last decade by LAPDS, a customized service that helps schools and school districts meet their accountability goals. In their current efforts, LAPDS team members are helping teachers change both what and how they teach in order to effectively implement the Common Core State Standards.

A challenging transition

Transitioning to a curriculum based on the Common Core is not simple or easy. Educators first need to be aware of and fully understand how teaching to these new standards differs from what and how they have taught in the past. In part, that will mean teaching more rigorous content material in ways that better develop students’ higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis and application. To prepare, teachers need to align their curriculum, materials, and instructional practices to the standards. Then they must build assessment tools to evaluate student mastery of the skills and concepts addressed in the standards.

According to Rosenfeld, school personnel are reacting to the challenge of implementing the standards in a variety of ways. “We’ve noticed varying degrees of urgency, excitement, and anxiety,” he says. “Some districts have adopted more of a wait-and-see attitude; others, particularly those under school improvement mandates, are being required to begin implementation and are taking it much more seriously.” In those districts where educators understand the standards and how students’ mastery of the standards will be assessed, there is the greatest interest in implementation.

He cautions educators against viewing the standards, which are designed to describe the knowledge and skills that students ultimately will need to succeed in postsecondary school and the world of work, as “just the latest” in a long line of short-lived school accountability initiatives. “This is not about coverage, or getting through a certain amount of material by the end of the year,”

► This article was first published in WestEd’s R&D Alert, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2013.



says Rosenfeld. “It’s about helping students grasp big ideas, make connections between those ideas, and demonstrate deep understanding of those ideas through more interesting and novel ways than simple recall.” For example, rather than answering a multiple-choice question on when the Civil War began, students might need to write a short essay to describe the war’s main causes.

Instructional shifts

The first step in LAPDS’s training process of preparing teachers for the transition usually takes place during a one-day workshop at which teachers are introduced to the standards and, specifically, the “instructional shifts” that the standards will necessitate. These shifts—which involve changing the way one teaches in order to bring about different learning outcomes—call on language arts teachers, for example, to assign more nonfiction reading than in the past. What’s more, students as young as those in second grade are asked to place high value on the information found in the texts they read, both in conversations about what they’ve read and in their written work. “They need to be able to demonstrate the ability to answer text-dependent questions, to ground their answers in specific evidence,” says Jameyson. Another shift is an expectation that students will spend more time learning and reading increasingly complex vocabulary.

In mathematics, the standards call for students to learn in ways that go beyond memorizing formulas and using them to come up with the right answer to a problem. “It even goes beyond having students show their work,” says Rosenfeld. “To meet the standards, students need to understand the relationship between numbers—for example, the numerator and denominator in a fraction, or numbers along a number line—and be able to demonstrate their understanding of those relationships, maybe by writing about why a negative number multiplied by another negative number is always positive.” Mathematics teachers also will be responsible for finding ways to increase students’ speed and accuracy when it comes to simple calculations and make sure students know how to apply math concepts to problem solving.

According to Rosenfeld and Jameyson, these are the kinds of skills that help students understand abstract ideas and concepts, and ultimately master complex, high-level mathematics, as well as write research papers in which they convincingly defend their arguments. “It’s about preparing them, up to 10 years in advance, for college, careers, and the real world,” says Rosenfeld.

New curriculum, assessment tools

In the most difficult and time-consuming part of LAPDS’s process, teachers must create a curriculum incorporating these instructional shifts and the instructional strategies needed to best teach them. Says Rosenfeld, “This is when teachers dig in and do the hard work.” That includes building units of study and lesson plans as well as mid- and end-of-unit assessments. Jameyson says she has noticed that as teachers get to know the standards, “they begin to realize the standards are well built and deliberately designed.” As a result, the teachers begin “to trust the standards, and us, and the process we’re putting forth.” She says she frequently notes, as the training progresses, “a collective sigh of relief from teachers who realize that we are going back to something that makes sense.”

Rosenfeld points out that asking teachers raised in the world of “following the textbook” to become designers of their own curriculum is no small thing. Still, he says, it’s the best way for



them to fully understand not only what and how the Common Core initiative aims to change teaching and learning, but also why. Adds Jameyson, “We know that teachers who put their time, heart, and effort into the process become invested in it and are much more likely to use it well.”

According to Jameyson, teachers seem most concerned about the Common Core assessment systems—due to be rolled out during the 2014/15 school year—that will be used to measure student progress. WestEd’s LAPDS gives teachers access to sample assessment items and helps them design and use their own mid-unit assessments to gauge student progress.

A proven model

According to Rosenfeld, much of LAPDS’s work with teachers around the Common Core is based on successful strategies used in the past. “It’s still about giving teachers opportunities to have intelligent, professional conversations about instruction and learning, and making sure teachers understand the needs of their students,” he says.

One time-honored way to ensure that happens: classroom observations followed by “debriefing” conversations in which WestEd staff note how successfully teachers targeted the instructional shifts called for in the new standards and provide tips on how to do so even more effectively. “We know from experience such sessions help build trust,” says Jameyson.

Administrators in two school systems now working with WestEd say the experience has been fruitful. “We’ve been fortunate to have had WestEd helping us figure out what the Common Core is asking us to do and how to implement it,” says Mark Meyer, Assistant Superintendent in Colorado’s Alamosa School District. Jackie Zeller, Director of Secondary Curriculum Instruction for California’s San Jose School District, agreed that the help of an outside provider was critical. “We know this is a huge challenge and we needed support.” The Alamosa and San Jose districts, both operating under federal school improvement mandates, have been working with WestEd for the last three and two years, respectively. Meyer notes that Alamosa is already seeing improved student achievement; according to Zeller, new curriculum units and lesson plans were developed in her district this spring.

Among the challenges WestEd faces in its work with school districts around the new standards, says Rosenfeld, is helping educators who view the Common Core as a mandate shift to seeing the initiative as something positive that will enable them to reexamine and refine their teaching practices.

Jameyson notes that with more research into and information about the standards coming out every day, WestEd’s work on the subject is constantly evolving. “We’re growing and changing along with our clients.” She says it’s up to WestEd staff “to make sure we’re staying abreast of the newest research on the Common Core and that we represent that research well in our work.”

For more information on how WestEd’s Local Accountability Professional Development Series is helping schools and school districts implement the Common Core State Standards, contact Bob Rosenfeld and Liz Jameyson at rdalert@WestEd.org.