



Preparing for the Common Core

Using Performance Assessment Tasks for Professional Development

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at
WestEd | Research conducted by SRI International



This policy brief was developed under the auspices of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd, which is dedicated to improving teacher-development policy and practice. For nearly two decades, the Center has been steadfast in the pursuit of its mission to ensure that every student in California’s elementary and secondary schools has a well-prepared, effective, and caring teacher. WestEd, a research, development, and service agency, works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

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INTRODUCTION

With its adoption of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) in August 2010, the California State Board of Education opened a new chapter in the state’s standards-based reform movement. Today, California is 1 of 26 member states and affiliates participating in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced), which is developing an assessment system aligned with the new standards. The state’s students are slated to first take these new assessments for accountability purposes at the end of the 2014/15 school year; between now and then, California teachers must prepare their students for success. But are the teachers themselves prepared for success in implementing the new standards?

Signing on to the Common Core is California’s second foray into the world of standards and standards-aligned assessments. In the 1980s and 1990s, the state was at the forefront of the standards movement with its adoption of content standards that drove the curriculum frameworks and the statewide assessments. But California’s experiences moving to a standards-based system mirror those of many other states: In the absence of well-aligned assessments and a robust teacher development system, standards have had limited success in supporting desired changes in instructional practice and student outcomes.¹ This history lesson underscores the importance of appropriately and adequately supporting California teachers in changing their practice if the Common Core standards are to fulfill their promise.

The development and use of performance assessment tasks is one strategy that has shown promise in supporting desired changes in teachers’ instructional practice.

Changing instructional practice is difficult. The state legislature has acknowledged this challenge by dedicating \$1.25 billion from the 2013/14 state budget to support districts in providing, among other possible supports, additional professional development to help teachers prepare for the Common Core. So now, with only one more year before California students begin taking Common Core–aligned assessments for accountability purposes, districts are under pressure to step up the pace of Common Core implementation by identifying professional development strategies that will enable teachers to fully meet the instructional demands of the new standards. The development and use of performance assessment tasks is one strategy that has shown promise in supporting desired changes in teachers’ instructional practice.² Performance assessment tasks are designed to measure students’ ability to apply their knowledge and skills in response to complex questions or problems. A single performance assessment task includes a series of questions and activities that are

¹ For more on the relationship between education reforms and changes in instructional practice, see Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Cuban, 1990; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002.

² For more information on the role of performance assessments in changing instruction, see Borko, Flory, and Cumbo, 1993; Falk & Darling-Hammond, 1993; Khattri, Kane, and Reeve, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010.

connected to a single theme or scenario. In summer 2012, the California Office to Reform Education³ (CORE), a district consortium, began an effort to prepare teachers for the Common Core standards by supporting them to develop performance assessment tasks. In early 2013, participating districts piloted the tasks. This piloting experience is the focus of this study.

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd contracted with SRI International to interview teachers and administrative staff in three CORE districts about their experiences piloting the assessment tasks.⁴ Across the three districts, the SRI team conducted protocol-guided interviews with 80 individuals: 62 teachers, 15 school administrators (including principals and instructional coaches), and 3 district administrators. This policy brief presents the findings from those interviews. It describes the experiences of these teachers and administrators and examines how the pilot helped them learn about and prepare for the Common Core. The interviews also provided insights into the types of support these educators saw as important for their successful implementation of the Common Core. Their experiences and insights provide critical information for district administrators throughout the state, who are in the midst of selecting and/or implementing strategies to support teachers in the transition to the Common Core.

³ For more on CORE, see <http://coredistricts.org/>

⁴ At the time the pilot began, CORE had 8 member districts; at the time this paper is being published, there are 10.

THE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT TASK PILOT: A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STRATEGY TO PREPARE FOR THE COMMON CORE

Description of the Performance Assessment Task Pilot

In 2012, CORE staff and member districts designed a Common Core professional development experience through which district teams would develop performance assessment tasks during the summer, with their districts then piloting the tasks during the 2012/13 school year. In June 2012, each CORE district sent a team of teachers and school and district administrators to a three-day design institute at which participants were introduced to the Common Core and to the process of developing performance tasks to assess students' knowledge and skills relative to specific Common Core standards. National, state, and local experts provided participants with background information on the new standards and the work of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. They also presented guidance on how to develop a performance assessment task. Participants—both teachers and administrators—were then assigned a specific content area (English language arts [ELA] or mathematics) and a grade level (grades 1, 4, 7, or 9 for ELA; grades 3, 5, or 7 for mathematics) that matched their classroom experience or expertise. They then worked in cross-district groups to create a performance assessment task for their assigned content area and grade. The expectation was that each group would develop one task at the institute and two more tasks before the end of the summer.

CORE staff, along with participating administrators from CORE districts, reviewed and, if needed, modified all tasks, both those developed at the institute and those developed later in the summer. After that review, the CORE office ultimately provided all CORE districts access to a total of 64 performance assessment tasks,⁵ divided across the target grade levels and subject areas. See exhibit 1 for details on the performance assessment tasks.

[Click Below for Access to
Performance Assessments Tasks⁶](#)

CORE Math Performance Assessment Tasks

CORE ELA Performance Assessment Tasks

⁵ Following further revisions, 58 performance tasks are now available on the websites for which URLs are provided below.

⁶ URLs to access the performance tasks:

<http://cep01.managed.contegix.com/display/SAI/CORE+ELA+Performance+Assessment++Modules>

<http://cep01.managed.contegix.com/display/SAI/CORE+Math+Performance+Assessment+Modules>

Exhibit 1: Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs) Developed by CORE District Teams

Content area	Grade	Number of PATs created	Suggested instructional minutes for PATs	Materials included	Outline of PAT activities	Concepts and skills covered in PATs
Mathematics	3, 5, 7	8–9 per grade	Not specified	<p>Task overview: learning goal, Common Core standards, and skills and knowledge assessed under Smarter Balanced assessments</p> <p>Summary of activities in task</p> <p>Student handouts (i.e., task questions)</p> <p>Scoring guide</p>	<p>4–13 open-response questions (some with multiple sub-questions and organized into three parts)</p> <p>Culminating written argument (some)</p> <p>Instructions for group work in grade 7; otherwise, not specified</p>	<p>Calculate and interpret math problems involving: numbers and operations in base 10, fractions, geometry, measurement and data, algebraic thinking, ratios, and proportional relationships</p> <p>Explain reasoning using pictures, symbols, graphs, and text</p> <p>Apply math calculations to real-world contexts</p> <p>Construct an argument using mathematical concepts and calculations as evidence</p>
English language arts	1, 4, 7, 9	7–9 per grade	30 to 135 minutes	<p>Task overview: Common Core standards and skills and knowledge assessed under Smarter Balanced assessments</p> <p>Summary of activities in task</p> <p>Directions to teacher</p> <p>Student handouts (i.e., reading passage, graphic organizer, task questions)</p> <p>Writing rubrics</p>	<p>Group or individual reading</p> <p>Note taking using graphic organizers; pair or small group discussion</p> <p>3–8 constructed-response questions</p> <p>Final writing task</p>	<p>Support claims with text-based evidence</p> <p>Analyze text characteristics: plot, setting, characters, theme, key details</p> <p>Determine text-based word meaning and analyze diction</p> <p>Write explanatory, informative, and opinion essays with supporting evidence</p> <p>Engage in oral communication and collaborative discussion</p>

Source. Authors' analysis of CORE's performance assessment tasks

Each CORE district selected a cohort of teachers to pilot the performance tasks during the 2012/13 school year, choosing teachers from each grade level for which performance assessment tasks were developed (grades 3, 5, and 7 for mathematics, and grades 1, 4, 7, and 9 for ELA).⁷ Teachers were asked to pilot one performance task and to complete their pilot by early 2013. The purpose of piloting the performance assessment tasks was twofold: to provide teachers with an opportunity to use Common Core–aligned performance assessment tasks and to provide feedback to CORE on the newly developed tasks. At the time of the pilot, CORE districts were in various stages of Common Core implementation, and it was not expected that all teachers would have begun teaching to the new standards prior to piloting the Common Core–based assessment tasks. CORE districts tailored the pilot to their own contexts, establishing their own criteria or processes for

- Selecting participating teachers,
- Selecting the performance assessment tasks to pilot,
- Preparing teachers for the pilot,
- Preparing students to take the performance assessment tasks,
- Scoring the tasks, and
- Debriefing about teachers’ experiences with the tasks.

In all three districts, principals had a role in selecting or nominating teachers for the pilot, and those teachers chosen for the pilot were generally considered by school or district administrators to have strong instructional practices or were enthusiastic about learning about the Common Core. In two of the districts, teams of teachers in the same grade level at the same school (not necessarily all teachers at that grade level) were selected to pilot the performance tasks for their grade. In the third district, performance tasks were piloted by teachers who taught that grade level at different schools.

In two of the three districts, district administrators selected the performance assessment tasks that would be piloted at each grade level. In the third district, teacher teams were given all performance assessment tasks for their grade level and chose which of the tasks to pilot.

District-by-district rollout details are presented below in exhibit 2.

⁷ Note that for grade 7 assessment tasks, two groups of grade 7 teachers were selected, one a cohort of mathematics teachers and the other of English language arts teachers.

Exhibit 2: Key Features of the Performance Assessment Task Pilot in the Study Districts

	District A	District B	District C
Teacher selection	Principals volunteered their schools for the pilot and selected pairs or teams of teachers in the same grade or content area.	Principals suggested teacher teams at specific grade levels. District chose a maximum of one team per school.	Principals from schools across the district were asked to solicit interest from their best teachers. Those teachers were given the choice to participate.
Selection of tasks	District selected tasks.	Teacher teams selected tasks.	District selected tasks.
Preparing teachers for the tasks	District provided a two-hour training that introduced the pilot to both teachers and administrators.	Same as District A.	District provided a two-hour training that introduced the pilot to teachers.
Preparing students for the tasks	Varied across the district. Some teachers modified their instruction to explicitly prepare students for the tasks. Other teachers did not modify their instruction.	Varied across the district. If instruction was modified, district administrators encouraged teachers to work in their grade-level teams to provide the same modified instruction to all students.	Teachers did not modify instruction to explicitly prepare students for the tasks.
Scoring the tasks	Teachers could choose but were not required to score the tasks on their own. If they chose not to, district office staff scored the tasks. No district-wide training was held to calibrate scoring for teachers who chose to score the tasks.	Participating teachers scored tasks. No district-wide training was held for teachers to calibrate scoring.	Participating teachers scored tasks at district scoring sessions. No district-wide training was held to calibrate scoring.
Debriefing	Debriefings occurred during teacher planning/collaboration time and staff meetings. No district-wide debriefing session occurred.	Same as District A.	Teachers debriefed with other pilot teachers during district scoring sessions.

Building a Foundation for Instructional Change through Performance Assessment

Educators' experiences with the CORE pilot suggest that the performance assessment tasks supported teachers' understanding of the Common Core by

- Exposing teachers to the expectations for students that are embodied in the standards,
- Revealing gaps and alignment between students' current knowledge and skills and what's expected under the Common Core, and
- Emphasizing the types of instructional practices teachers will need in order to prepare students for the new standards and aligned assessments.

This section discusses each of these areas in turn.

Performance tasks helped teachers understand the Common Core expectations for students

Observing students' experiences with a Common Core–aligned performance assessment task gave teachers a firsthand look at what their students will be expected to know and be able to do under the Common Core State Standards. Teachers reported that, compared to what has been expected of students in the past, the ELA performance assessment tasks had a greater emphasis on writing, speaking, and listening skills while the math tasks required deeper understanding of mathematical concepts. As one teacher put it, students tend to use a “hunt and peck” strategy to sift through the textbook to find single-word responses to answer questions, but the performance assessment task demanded that they draw on both a deep understanding of a text and on inferential skills to craft appropriate responses. Seeing what would be expected of students under the Common Core demystified the new standards for teachers, especially for those who had little prior exposure to the Common Core.

Performance tasks helped teachers realize both gaps and alignment between students' current knowledge and skills and the Common Core expectations

For the majority of teachers⁸ the performance assessment tasks highlighted the gaps between students' current knowledge and skills and the Common Core expectations. As a result of the pilot, educators learned that many students are not performing at the level necessary to succeed under the Common Core. As one district administrator reported,

[Students] can answer questions. They could do the computation part of the math, but when it came to either synthesizing their answers and [writing] an essay or explaining how they got the answer that they got and explaining their reasoning, it pretty much fell apart.

⁸ When discussing teacher responses, this report uses “majority” for more than 50 percent of the respondents and “several” for more than 10 but less than 20 respondents.

Students frequently struggled to explain their reasoning on the mathematics performance assessment tasks. Several teachers also noted that students had difficulty explaining their reasoning when asked to provide evidence to support a response on the ELA performance assessment tasks.

Not only were many students reportedly unprepared for the academic rigor of the performance assessment tasks, they also were not ready to work in groups effectively. Teachers noted that many students did not know how to have academic conversations. Students struggled to apply speaking and listening skills in the group activity portions of the performance assessment tasks. As one teacher explained,

[The performance assessment task] just made me more aware that the kids really need to start talking because a lot of them don't know how. They don't know how to have a conversation about anything that's not Justin Bieber or Cheetos. They get lost.

That being said, several educators noted that some of their lower-performing students did better than expected on some aspects of the performance assessment tasks, signaling areas of alignment between these students' knowledge and skills and the Common Core standards. Educators reported that the small-group work and the opportunities it provided for students to talk about what they understood offered a way for lower-performing students to demonstrate their knowledge. As one principal said,

Even very quiet kids [who] are not necessarily your stars in the classroom are shining in these little groups. . . . There's time to really talk about what's going on in that article [in the performance assessment task]. So by bringing the Common Core piece into the classroom, teachers are seeing kids shine that weren't shining before.

The performance assessment task format allows teachers to give students partial credit for demonstrating what they understand as opposed to multiple-choice formats that give credit only for a final answer. A middle school math teacher recounted that some of her special education students performed better than she would have expected on the performance assessment task:

Some of my lower performers are my special education students. They were able to do a lot more and show me that they knew more than I would have been able to see on a multiple-choice test. . . . I knew that they were getting it, but they just can't get those multiple-choice questions right. So to be able to hear them talking . . . it was a nice insight to see what was really happening.

On the other hand, the new assessment format was more challenging for some students, even those who had performed well on traditional standardized tests. One teacher recalled a student who, after several minutes, had not yet written anything down. "Where are the choices?" the student asked, and then began to cry.

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Performance tasks helped teachers understand the changes in instructional practice demanded by the Common Core

The experience of piloting the performance assessment tasks helped the majority of teachers see the relationship between what their students struggled with on the tasks and their own instruction. They noted that the areas in which students struggled were often areas that they did not emphasize in their instruction, such as requiring evidence in written responses or having students participate in student-led small-group discussions. As one teacher explained, her district's focus on having teachers use direct instruction emphasized students "echoing correct answers." The performance assessment task, this teacher pointed out, showed her that the Common Core emphasizes students' ability to work in groups and their ability to have academic conversations without direction from the teacher.

The majority of teachers reported that, after the pilot, they incorporated new instructional strategies specifically targeted to addressing the gaps revealed by students' performance on the piloted assessment tasks. The most common changes mentioned were requiring more evidence-based writing, facilitating more class discussion, providing time for student collaboration, and including more rigorous questioning in daily lessons. For example, a math teacher explained that she began shifting norms in her middle school classroom to include more dialogue and group work among her students. Where her mantra used to be, "Quit talking and start [working]," she now has students discuss a math question or scenario in groups. In what she calls "number talks," students discuss in small groups what the problem is asking and the different tools they can use to solve the problem. Only then are students allowed to pick up their pencils to begin solving the problem.

Educators' exposure to the rigor of the Common Core standards and to both the difficulties and the successes students experienced with the tasks contributed to increased teacher buy-in for the Common Core. Most educators reported that they believe that the Common Core will lead to improved student learning. Yet they were not naïve about the effort ahead of them. Teachers acknowledged the immense work that would be required for a successful transition to the Common Core. As one teacher summarized,

It's taking our students and our instruction to a whole other level, so it's intimidating. It's going to be great, but it's going to be tough. We've got a long way to go for our students to be able to handle these types of tasks.

Teachers and principals identified several supports they would like to receive as they move toward full implementation of the Common Core State Standards. These supports are discussed in the next section.

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SUPPORTING TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON CORE

Teachers and principals noted three areas of support they need from their districts to fully implement the Common Core:

- Clear communication of the district's vision for Common Core implementation,
- Professional development that demonstrates Common Core–aligned instruction, and
- Time to plan together.

Clear communication of the district's vision for Common Core implementation

Although district administrators reported overseeing activities and initiatives aimed at providing Common Core–related professional development for teachers and school administrators, the districts' Common Core implementation plans were not always clearly communicated to teachers. As one teacher stated, “[I would feel] much more supported knowing . . . that people who are making the decisions . . . actually know what the transition's going to look like.” A few educators also noted that they wanted clear guidelines about how teachers should be implementing the new standards. One teacher put it this way:

The person next to me could be doing something completely different . . . I am really worried that we are not aligned at all. . . . They are calling it Common Core, [but] there is nothing common about what's going on.

Professional development that demonstrates Common Core–aligned instruction

Teachers wanted to see Common Core instruction in action. Several posed very similar questions about what effective Common Core instruction would really look like in their classrooms and suggested that it would be helpful to see it in videos, to observe model lessons, and to receive instructional coaching. It would be particularly helpful, teachers said, to see examples in classrooms that looked like their own—classes of 30 or more students, with a range of performance levels and abilities, and inclusion of English language learners.

Several teachers reported that observing live model lessons or having a coach observe them teaching Common Core lessons and providing feedback would give them the targeted support they desire. One teacher said,

I want to see the real thing instead of the video. . . . My principal has shown us videos and clips of certain things, but I want to see it—like a full lesson where I am actually in the class and I can actually be a part of it, and, if I have any questions, then I can ask afterwards.

Giving Teachers Coaching Support for Common Core Implementation

In one study district, instructional coaches have provided Common Core support to individual teachers. Schools have access to a cadre of district coaches from which they select the coach or coaches who best meet their needs. Teachers can also request individual support from a coach. One high school English teacher who enthusiastically embraces the Common Core wanted support from an instructional coach knowledgeable about the new standards. A district coach began working with this teacher at the beginning of the 2012/13 school year. The teacher and coach jointly developed Common Core–aligned lessons, and the coach visited the teacher’s classroom every other week in the first semester. The coach not only served as a sounding board for the teacher on ideas about designing Common Core lessons, but also helped test new instructional strategies intended to support Common Core implementation. Specifically, in fall 2012, the coach taught one of the teacher’s classes for eight days, trying out new strategies while the teacher observed and provided feedback on them. In 2013/14, this teacher’s classroom will be a Common Core model, and other teachers will be able to observe his Common Core–aligned lessons.

Time to plan together

Several teachers reported needing time to plan as they change their instruction and develop new lessons aligned to the Common Core. They report that working with colleagues is an important part of the planning process. Time to debrief with colleagues as teachers try new strategies was also mentioned as an important part of effectively transitioning to the Common Core. “The biggest thing,” said one teacher, “is actually getting to teach, getting something to try [in the classroom], coming back to debrief, discuss, change if needed . . . [then] go back and teach it, have another debrief.”

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

The experiences of the CORE districts in this study highlighted several important lessons for district administrators to consider before using performance assessment tasks as a Common Core professional development strategy.

1. Be clear with teachers about the purpose of piloting performance assessment tasks as a professional learning strategy to prepare for the Common Core.

When the process of piloting performance assessment tasks was framed as a way to prepare them for the Common Core, teachers saw the pilot as a sneak peak at a new way of teaching and assessing student learning. When the Common Core was framed in this way, teachers used the opportunity to reflect on their own practice. However, when the pilot was framed as a way to provide feedback on the content or structure of the tasks, teachers did not see it as a professional learning opportunity for themselves.

2. Use performance assessment tasks covering content or skills that have already been taught or will be taught as part of the task.

Teachers were more likely to view the pilot as an opportunity to reflect on their own practice when the tasks covered content or skills that they had taught in the regular curriculum sequence. Teachers piloting tasks that covered content or skills students had not yet learned found the experience frustrating and did not view it as an opportunity to reflect on their own practice.

3. Provide teachers with collaboration time to prepare for and debrief about using performance assessment tasks.

Teachers reported that collaboration with other pilot teachers was a valuable support. Collaboration with their grade-level colleagues before administering the performance task was crucial for working through questions the performance assessment tasks raised so that the teachers understood the intended outcomes of the tasks. Debriefing on students' performance on the tasks provided teachers with an opportunity to explore not only the gaps in student understanding, but also an opportunity to discuss potential changes to instruction. Debriefing sessions also provided district administrators with important insights into what future district-wide Common Core professional development should include.

4. Offer time and support for teachers to score performance assessment tasks.

Teachers, coaches, and administrators found scoring the performance assessment tasks useful for learning about student needs, identifying gaps in classroom instruction, and planning for future professional development to address the gaps. Because using scoring rubrics can be new to teachers,

especially in mathematics, providing them with formal support on how to use the rubrics to accurately identify student and instructional needs is crucial.

5. Support teachers in experimenting with new Common Core–aligned instructional practices and strategies.

Teachers felt free to experiment with new instructional practices to more closely align their practices with the Common Core State Standards. The majority of teachers reported trying out new strategies in direct response to their experience with the performance assessment task pilot.

With the Common Core fresh in their minds from the performance task pilot, teachers were asked what they felt they would need from their districts in order to effectively implement the new standards and assessments. Three common themes emerged.

1. A clear vision of how the district plans to work toward Common Core implementation.

Teachers voiced concerns that without a clear district vision for Common Core implementation, teachers would not receive the direction they need to make significant changes to their instructional practice. They explained that, as teachers, it was challenging to commit to making significant changes to their instructional practice when district leadership had yet to commit to and/or communicate a consistent vision for Common Core implementation.

2. Professional development that demonstrates Common Core–aligned instruction and that enables teachers to envision this type of instruction in their own classroom.

Although the Common Core standards outline what students should know at the end of an academic year, the standards do not provide guidance on instructional strategies that are most effective in teaching to the new standards. Several teachers pointed out that observing new instructional strategies aligned to the Common Core would go a long way in helping them align their own instructional practice to the Common Core and that these new strategies would need to be effective both with the full range of diverse learners in their classrooms, and with the class sizes that are typical in California.

3. Time for teachers to plan and debrief Common Core–aligned instruction, including lesson planning, with colleagues.

Teachers who had experienced time with their colleagues to plan and debrief on their efforts to change their instructional practice reported that it was crucial not only to the development of new instructional strategies, but also to building their collective understanding of which strategies work best.

The 2013/14 school year is pivotal for California districts in their efforts to transition to the Common Core. For the first time, California districts have state funds dedicated specifically to preparing for the Common Core. Selecting effective strategies to support teachers in aligning their instruction to the Common Core will be challenging. This policy brief provides evidence of the value of using performance assessment tasks as a strategy for preparing teachers for the Common Core.

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