

CENTERVIEW

Insight and analysis on
California education policy

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Willing but Not Yet Ready:

A glimpse of California teachers' preparedness for the Common Core State Standards

California is on the precipice of implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were developed through an initiative of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to reflect the knowledge and skills needed for success in college and careers. In California, one of 45 adopting states, the standards represent a significant shift in expectations for both teaching and learning, not just in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, but also in literacy related to science and history/social science. The newly adopted standards call for a deep conceptual understanding of the content in ELA and mathematics and, also, for the ability to apply this content to other disciplines. New assessments aligned to the standards are due to be implemented in 2014-15. It all sounds good. But are teachers ready to teach to the new standards?

"What is Common Core? I have heard the phrase 'Common Core,' but I couldn't tell you anything about it until today."

– Experienced elementary teacher

This was the primary concern driving a series of focus groups commissioned by WestEd's Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in October 2011. Six groups were convened by Belden Russonello Strategists, LLC, to explore the following questions with teachers in Sacramento, San Francisco, and San Diego:

- How familiar are teachers with the CCSS?
- What are their beliefs about their own expertise and ability to teach their subject matter under the CCSS?
- What changes in practice do they think will be necessary to satisfy the new standards?

The focus groups were designed to represent six specific subgroups of teachers: elementary (one group consisted of teachers with more than 10 years of experience, and another consisted of teachers with less than 10 years of experience¹); middle and high school mathematics; middle and high school science; middle and high school history/social studies; and middle and high school English language arts. Because the focus group design inherently limits the number of participants, the findings across these focus groups cannot be generalized to the entire teacher population. However, they can be used to identify potential areas of challenge as districts and the state plan the transition to full implementation of the CCSS, as well as to identify areas for future research.

Key Findings

The majority of focus group participants had little familiarity with the details of the CCSS; but, when presented with a brief description, most participants appreciated the standards' focus on critical thinking and real-world relevance, as well as the fact that the standards are consistent (i.e., aligned) from one grade to the next. For the most part, they welcome the new standards. However, a few of the participants with more teaching experience — those who have seen reforms come and go — are skeptical that the new standards will take root. There was also some concern that teachers had not been adequately involved in the standards' development.

As participants learned more about the differences between the new standards and the current California standards (which went into effect in 1997), they expressed enthusiasm. But some of the differences in what will be required to help students meet the new standards — greater autonomy in teaching, increased interdisciplinary readings, progressively complex texts, an emphasis on informational texts, and a focus on process over content — also raised some concerns. For instance, science teachers worry that the CCSS' focus on literacy in science will limit hands-on learning. Specifically, they fear that the standards' greater emphasis on reading and understanding texts will result in less time for teaching their students through lab experiments and field trips. Keenly aware of the maxim that "what is tested is taught," they worry that, if the science literacy standards are the only standards tested for science, teachers will feel pressured to use their scarce science time focused on science literacy rather than on a comprehensive experiential science curriculum. English language arts teachers have similar concerns; they worry that the CCSS' focus on informational text will push literature out of the curriculum, which they already see happening to some degree anyway.

Middle and high school mathematics and science teachers explicitly identified their need for additional training if they are to implement the new standards effectively. The two groups clearly recognized the need under the new standards to substantially alter their current teaching style in order to help students think more deeply and analytically in a specific subject. The math teachers in particular were very clear that they had never *been* taught math in the manner necessary for successfully teaching to the new

“[The students] definitely have to be taught [how to do this]...They really do have to think in a different way, but I think it is definitely possible and beneficial.”

– History/social studies teacher

1. The elementary subgroup was divided in this way because those teachers with less than 10 years of experience have spent their entire careers in an era during which the state curriculum has provided specific directives on *how* to teach; CFTL wanted to ascertain if these teachers would view the new standards and implementation issues differently from their more experienced colleagues.

standards, that they had never taught in that manner themselves, and that they were not sure how to go about it. Thus, they said, they need as much assistance as possible from their districts and schools if they are to teach effectively to these new standards.

Finally, elementary school teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experience said they would like guidance in the early stages of implementation to make certain they are on the right track. The group of veteran elementary teachers expressed the belief that, while they themselves were well prepared for the transition to the new standards, their less experienced colleagues would need guidance. On the other hand, the middle and high school math participants voiced their belief that *all* elementary teachers will need specific guidance if they are to adequately implement the standards; the middle and high school teachers based this belief on their observation that, even under the *current* standards, many students are entering the upper grades unprepared for math classes. They worry that the gap between expectations for students and their actual capacity will only grow under the new standards.

“[I need] training so that I know how to teach the mathematical practices with lots of examples — and not just one training at the beginning of the year, but often so that when new problems or challenges [come up] I have training.”

— Mathematics Teacher

The Center View

With implementation of the Common Core State Standards imminent, the fact that so many focus-group teachers knew very little about the standards and what they will mean for their teaching practice is of concern.

We recommend that *districts and schools* take immediate action on the following:

- Educate teachers about the standards: how they were developed and teachers’ role in that process; the goals and structure of the standards; and the expectations for how the standards will influence teachers’ practice. Teachers must be assured that the CCSS will *replace* existing standards and that they will not be required to teach to both sets of standards simultaneously.
- Engage representative teachers in planning how the district will implement the new standards. Educate all teachers about the implementation process, including how it was planned (especially, teacher involvement), the implementation role of the individual teacher, and timelines.
- Create a climate in which it is acceptable for teachers to begin transitioning to the new standards without fear of being punished under current accountability measures. Districts will need to allay teachers’ concerns that they may have to prepare students for the California Standards Tests at the same time they begin teaching to the CCSS.
- Provide intensive, ongoing professional development about the differences between current standards and the CCSS regarding content and pedagogy. Districts must explicitly unpack the two sets of standards, illuminating the gap between them and articulating the expectations under the new standards. If there is to be a successful transition to the new standards, teachers must have appropriate materials and resources, whether they are provided by the district or whether, with the district’s blessing, they are identified or developed by the teachers themselves.

- Explain how new assessments will be linked to the CCSS standards. There is a great deal of apprehension among teachers about how the changes in standards will be assessed adequately, particularly how critical thinking skills can be assessed in a standardized test. As soon as they are made available, provide transparency about what the tests are going to look like so that teachers can understand how each individual standard is represented in the tests. In addition, once decisions about the accountability system have been made, explain the role of the tests within that system (e.g., the weighting of subject areas, grade levels tested, other factors beyond tests that may be included).

We recommend that *institutions of higher education*

- Begin adapting teacher preparation programs now. The teacher candidates enrolling today will encounter a far different instructional setting than the one for which they are currently being prepared.

Given the high stakes for the state's students, it is imperative that the CCSS implementation effort be appropriately supported. Thus, we recommend that *state leaders*

- Provide resources that enable districts and schools to engage in the type of professional development described above. Allow counties, districts, and schools the flexibility to tailor their professional development programs to their local needs.

We understand the complexities inherent in the challenge faced by all California schools as they transition to the Common Core State Standards. But teachers are relying on their leaders to guide them down the right path, just as students are relying on their teachers to prepare them for college and career. Education leaders at every level must accept that responsibility and cannot hesitate to act. The time is now.