

# Common Core implementation in California

## A SNAPSHOT OF DISTRICTS' PROGRESS

It's been six years since California adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), also known as the California Standards inside the Golden State. District leaders have been busy building capacity and developing infrastructure to support effective CCSS implementation, while teachers have been working hard to implement CCSS-aligned instruction that supports academic success for all students. But, in a state as vast and varied as California, what exactly does CCSS implementation look like and what sort of progress are districts making?

To get an accurate snapshot of where California districts are in their implementation of the CCSS, we went straight to the source. Staff from the Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd (The Center) interviewed superintendents and instructional leaders from 42 districts and charter management organizations (collectively referred to as *study districts* in this issue) from urban, suburban, and rural areas across the entire state.\*

### California district leaders offer insights about Common Core implementation

District leaders told us about various key aspects of CCSS implementation in their districts: building capacity to support CCSS implementation; developing teachers' proficiency in CCSS-aligned instruction; adopting CCSS-aligned curricula; and using varied funds to cover CCSS implementation expenses.

Although the findings from our interviews cannot be generalized to all districts within and beyond state lines, the insights from this study reflect the state of CCSS implementation in California, the challenges that district leaders perceive, and the potential for opportunities to further support CCSS implementation that promotes the academic success of all students.

This issue is the first of a special three-part series. In the second and third accompanying *CenterViews*, we delve deeper into districts' reported implementation challenges and offer strategies that technical assistance providers can consider to better meet districts' current implementation needs.

### Districts have built internal capacity over time to support CCSS implementation

When the California Department of Education (CDE) adopted the CCSS in 2010, districts were given flexibility to roll out the new standards using a multi-tiered implementation plan spread over five years in three phases — awareness, transition, and implementation. Consequently, this gradual and flexible approach led to varying implementation plans across the state, which, along with differing contexts and uneven access to resources and assistance, has resulted in a wide variety of unique local needs today.

- **During the awareness phase** (roughly 2010–12), study districts focused on building teacher knowledge of the standards, primarily relying on external expertise from the CDE, county offices of education, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and independent consultants to provide most of the technical assistance to districts.

\* Combined, this representative sample of 42 "study districts," serves nearly 900,000 California students. For more information on methodology and district demographic data, see [thecenter.wested.org](http://thecenter.wested.org).

- **During the *transition phase*** (2012–13), study districts began either full or partial implementation of the CCSS, with variation in the way they phased their content and grade-level implementation. While large districts often rolled out the CCSS in partial phases, rural and small districts overwhelmingly rolled out the CCSS in full implementation.
- **During the *implementation phase*** (2013–15), districts’ focus shifted from using external providers toward strengthening internal capacity to support their particular implementation plans. Accordingly, districts invested in instructional coaches and teacher leaders to help lead instructional change and focused on creating or sourcing — with varying degrees of success — interim and formative assessments to demonstrate student progress and inform instruction.

Although the state-defined, formal implementation phase has ended, districts say they are still in the process of strengthening their implementation capacity — which is not surprising, given the complexity involved in organizing the resources and assistance to shift the instructional practice of 300,000 teachers.

## A continuum of teacher proficiency in CCSS-aligned instruction

District leaders are optimistic about their teachers’ progress toward proficiency in CCSS-aligned instruction. While district leaders report that their teachers are still transitioning and developing their proficiency with instructional strategies that help students meet the California standards, they also report that teachers are deepening their understanding of the standards, learning to make instructional shifts aligned to the standards, and collaborating around instructional practice.

When asked to identify teachers’ level of proficiency along a continuum of development in CCSS-aligned instruction, district leaders indicated that 100 percent of teachers know the CCSS, and of those teachers, nearly all (89 percent in English language arts [ELA], 90 percent in mathematics) “know instructional strategies to implement the standards.” Additionally, district leaders indicated that about one-third of teachers (36 percent in ELA, 30 percent in mathematics) were “fluently using instructional strategies” to differentiate instruction.

**“In math, [the Common Core] is quite a shift. The academic discourse—students being expected to justify responses — is very different than before. More resources are needed to support CCSS-aligned math instruction.”**

— District leader

District leaders’ perception that teachers’ proficiency with CCSS-aligned instruction is still evolving resonates with a message that middle and high school mathematics teachers shared with us in the early years of implementation — that they had never been taught the pedagogical content knowledge required to teach the new standards effectively and they desired targeted professional development from their districts.<sup>1</sup>

Districts have identified that teachers need more support through high-quality professional learning and coaching to reach the level of proficiency expected of them. (A forthcoming issue of this series focuses on how districts are building internal capacity to advance all teachers on the continuum of mastery of CCSS-aligned instruction).

## Curricula conundrum: Adopt, adapt, or develop

The CDE adopted approved lists of CCSS-aligned mathematics curricula in January 2014 and ELA curricula in November 2015, leaving California districts to identify appropriate CCSS-aligned instructional materials on their own for the first four or five years of CCSS implementation. We asked district leaders how they selected CCSS-aligned curricula, and they identified three primary ways: adopting off-the-shelf curricula, creating hybrid curricula, and developing original curricula.

- **Off-the-shelf curricula.** Some districts invested early in identifying and adopting curricula, particularly for mathematics, where the pedagogical and content shifts were more of a challenge than for ELA. Many of these districts, however, indicated that they did not see strong alignment to the standards in these off-the-shelf materials, especially those from traditional publishers. Other districts have delayed their adoption of CCSS-aligned curricula, still waiting for education publishers to catch up and introduce new resources to the market.
- **Hybrid curricula.** Many districts that purchased off-the-shelf curricula have supplemented and adapted it with additional teacher-developed and/or open-source online educational resources. However, the vast amounts of unvetted curricula and resources available online have created a new challenge for educators. There is now a glut of resources billed as CCSS-aligned, but educators feel there is not enough guidance on how to identify quality resources and build a coherent curriculum.
- **District-developed curricula.** Due to the limitations of time, funding, and staffing to develop their own curricula, study districts have reported this approach to be the least common of the three. However, some districts responded to the lack of good existing materials by engaging teachers and coaches in the curriculum development process — using it as an opportunity for professional development.

**“Can someone put credible, reliable instructional materials and resources all in one place? I think that would significantly relieve time, stress and the burden.”**

– District leader

## Using varied funding sources for CCSS implementation expenses

CCSS implementation has generated a wave of new expenses for districts, including costs related to offering professional learning for teachers and administrators, vetting and/or developing standards-aligned curricula, organizing the necessary infrastructure and technology for state assessments, and supporting personnel in a variety of other CCSS implementation efforts.

The CDE has offered districts some sources of funding to support these sort of CCSS implementation expenses. In 2013, the CDE offered districts a one-time Common Core State Standards Implementation Fund, which most districts used to upgrade their technology infrastructure and scale their technology hardware, a necessity for administering the new state tests. While these one-time funds provided some relief, districts remain concerned about not having sources of long-term and continuous funding to sustain CCSS implementation.

**“We’ve received some nice one-time money from the state, but the challenge is that you can’t buy personnel with it. You can buy resources and professional development ... but when you’re thinking about reducing class sizes and adding interventions ... those all require human capital. You can only do so much with funding you’re going to have [just] once.”**

– District leader

In 2015, California districts gained access to Educator Effectiveness funds through a three-year, state-funded program to improve teacher support. In addition to providing coaching and support services for teachers needing improvement, districts plan to use these funds for teacher and administrator professional learning aligned to the state standards.

## Local needs shape budgets

California districts use different combinations of funding sources to support their particular CCSS implementation expenses. Urban and suburban districts, for example, mostly used the one-time Common Core Implementation Funds, as well as funds allocated through the state’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), and foundation-based grants. Rural districts rely primarily on general funds, Title I funds, and Educator Effectiveness funds.

While many districts have been developing their internal capacity to provide on-site professional learning, certain streams of funding do not allow for staffing expenses, such as payments for district coaches and teacher leaders. Accordingly, some districts are using other streams of funding, such as LCFF allocations and soft money from Title I and Title II, to pay for teacher leaders who are doing much of the work to sustain the CCSS. This approach of investing in personnel, while possible for districts in regions with an adequate supply of teachers, is less feasible for rural districts facing critical teacher shortages.

**For more on this study, or California Standards implementation:**

- Go to <https://thecenter.wested.org/>
- Contact Robert Sheffield, The Center's Director of California Initiatives, at [rsheffi@wested.org](mailto:rsheffi@wested.org)

## Districts voice a need for new kinds of support

While there have been various challenges to implementing the CCSS, districts have made significant progress on implementing the standards and building educators' CCSS-aligned instructional practices. Districts were given significant local autonomy to identify their needs and decide on the approaches they believed would work best for supporting CCSS implementation. We've learned from district leaders that districts have increased their capacity to provide essential services and resources to their sites to support CCSS implementation.

However, districts have also articulated that as teachers and administrators are ready to deepen California standards-based instruction and distribute instructional leadership, what they now need is no longer the same as in previous years. In forthcoming *CenterViews*, we describe the kind of assistance that the study districts are seeking at this stage of CCSS implementation, such as job-embedded professional learning, on-point assessments that inform standards-based instruction, time to collaborate, and new ways to partner with providers. We also describe the challenges that study districts face in providing teachers and administrators with these types of support and ways that technical assistance providers — from state education agencies to a variety of other external organizations — can take action in the collective effort to raise the bar for standards-aligned teaching and learning in California and beyond.

## End notes

1 WestEd, Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning. (2012). *Willing but not yet ready: A glimpse of California teachers' preparedness for the Common Core State Standards* (CenterView). San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

[<https://www.wested.org/resources/centerview-willing-but-not-yet-ready-a-glimpse-of-california-teachers-preparedness-for-the-common-core-state-standards/>]

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