

# California district leaders on Common Core

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GAPS PERSIST

*In this final installment on how California districts are faring with implementing state standards, the Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning (The Center) reports on the challenges of identifying quality instructional resources and providing effective professional learning, amidst ongoing barriers to funding, time, and teacher availability.*

In California, as in many other states across the nation, implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has been a complex endeavor impacting every public school educator. Not surprisingly, California districts have encountered bumps along the way in their efforts to provide much-needed support to all K–12 teachers as they continue to learn how to teach to the rigorous standards, which are now also known as the California (CA) Standards\* within the Golden State.

As we wrap up our three-part *CenterView* series about California district leaders' views on the state of implementation of the CA Standards, The Center focuses this final issue on the challenges districts face with ensuring that teachers have the right instructional resources and professional learning they need to prepare their students for postsecondary success. This issue concludes with action steps that service providers can take to help districts address barriers in the way of effectively advancing implementation of the standards.

### Wading through a sea of resources and assessments

Despite the abundance of curricula, assessments, and professional learning products on the market purported to be aligned to CCSS, district leaders are often overwhelmed by the enormity of offerings and wish they had more guidance on identifying high-quality resources and services. District leaders report that their teachers and instructional support teams are wading through a sea of resources and assessments, only sometimes finding what they need.

### Smarter Balanced Digital Library and interim assessments are underutilized

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) developed the computer-adaptive testing platform that all California districts must use to administer the state's standards-aligned tests. Additionally, Smarter Balanced offers a Digital Library that includes practice tests, interim assessments, formative assessment guidance, scoring rubrics, and educator-developed instructional modules — all intended to support educators in teaching and assessing in standards-aligned ways.

When we conducted interviews with district leaders in late 2015, the Smarter Balanced resources had been available to California educators for less than a year. With little to no training on the digital resources, educators began to access them

\* The CA Standards encompass standards for all content areas, including science, social sciences, English language development, and world language. However, in this *CenterView* series, the CA Standards refer specifically to the CCSS for English language arts and mathematics, as that was how the CA Standards were framed in the study interviews.

with limited guidance for how best to utilize them. Consequently, 89 percent of district leaders report that teachers were either not using the Smarter Balanced resources or didn't find them effective in supporting standards implementation. Specifically, district leaders indicate that teachers found the digital library too overwhelming to navigate and the instructional modules too specific, with limited applicability to their classrooms. Moreover, district leaders report that the interim assessments, which are not adaptable, provide data on student results at too global of a level to inform instruction.

Overall, districts report that they lack the tools and assessments that would give teachers useful formative data on students' performance on the CA Standards. One-third of districts indicate that they need standards-aligned, formative and interim assessments — beyond those offered by Smarter Balanced — to achieve their vision for full implementation of the CA Standards. Consequently, districts are either creating their own interim assessments — which has been time-intensive and has not always resulted in assessments aligned to the end-of-year tests — or they are searching for external products or expertise.

**"There's a glut of resources. It would be helpful if someone we trust could say, 'This is a good one,' so we don't have to wade through vendors constantly peddling their wares."**

— District leader

## Districts want guidance on selecting standards-aligned curricula

Districts acknowledge that there is a plethora of CCSS-aligned instructional and curricular resources — except for textbooks — available on the market and online. However, it is difficult and time consuming to identify the right resources to match particular instructional needs and to vet the materials for quality. District leaders say that their curriculum and instruction teams need time to research the options in order to identify appropriate instructional materials. They also report that they would appreciate a trusted source to advise them on the quality of available resources aligned to the standards or a website that offered current information about vetted standards-aligned resources.

## Gaps in professional learning

California district leaders report that helping teachers make the necessary shifts to align their instruction with the CA Standards for math and English language arts (ELA) has been a major challenge. While districts have focused much of their professional learning on helping teachers learn new pedagogical approaches, district leaders say that additional targeted professional learning is still needed to further advance standards-aligned instruction.

## Support for teachers as curriculum developers

In our first issue in this series, we discussed how California's delay in adopting math and ELA curricula led many districts to using various approaches to selecting standards-aligned curricula, including taking a hybrid approach in which they supplement or modify off-the-shelf curricula with teacher-developed curricula. The use of teacher-developed curricula is corroborated by a recent national study involving about 1,100 K–12 teachers of math and ELA, in which nearly all the teachers stated that they regularly use self-developed or self-selected instructional materials for standards-aligned instruction.<sup>1</sup>

**"In many districts, NCLB took away teachers' ability to be creative with instruction.... Our teachers need confidence that they can effectively design instruction."**

– District leader

However, while many teachers develop or select their own curriculum, teachers are generally not provided with adequate training to develop curriculum. Districts need to invest in more time and professional learning to help teachers acquire skills in developing curriculum and assessments aligned to the standards.

## Teachers need training and resources to better support English learners

District leaders also indicate that teachers in California, the state with the largest English learner population in the nation,<sup>2</sup> need targeted professional learning from experts who have extensive pedagogical knowledge for teaching English learners. With the CA Standards' increased expectation of analyzing informational text and a greater emphasis on discussion-based problem solving, teachers need appropriate materials and pedagogical strategies to help their English learners maintain the same level of academic and linguistic rigor as native-English-speaking students.

"We want more guidance and time to assist English learners.... the new assessments are very language-heavy. Districts with high [proportions of] English learners are struggling."  
– District leader

## School leaders also need support in effectively implementing CA Standards

While it is essential to provide professional learning to teachers to help them implement effective standards-aligned instruction, school leaders also need appropriate supports. Most of the California district leaders we interviewed acknowledge that, initially, there was a sense of urgency to provide standards-related professional learning for teachers, but not necessarily for school site leaders.

With the realization that professional learning for school leaders on the standards lagged, districts are now investing in building the capacity of school leaders with the state standards through a variety of opportunities, including principal professional learning communities, principal induction and coaching, cross-district planning sessions, and executive coaching with external providers. These professional learning opportunities enable school leaders to connect their standards implementation efforts to other leadership activities such as site-based data review, data-informed decision-making, norm development for site walkthroughs, and change management.

## Barriers to more professional learning: Shortage of money, time, and teachers

The majority of district leaders identify insufficient time and funding as the two greatest constraints to investing in more professional learning. These constraints, intertwined with many other system-level factors such as teacher shortages and teacher contract requirements, impact how effectively and consistently districts can provide professional learning.

- **Lack of funds for release days.** Despite implementation of the CA Standards being a major initiative, districts indicate that lack of funds prevents them from offering enough dedicated time to enable teachers to collaborate, create materials, and assess progress. In fact, the number of professional release days has actually decreased as districts have transitioned to full implementation of the CA Standards. Half of the districts we interviewed report providing three to five release days during the academic year, while the other half of the districts we interviewed are split between allocating more than five or fewer than three release days.
- **Lack of time in the school day.** The current school day offers limited embedded time for consistent professional learning and peer collaboration. Though teachers are expected to learn deeply about the standards and refine their practice accordingly, they have few opportunities in the school day to carry out this work.
- **Lack of teachers and substitutes.** Throughout California — and most acutely in rural areas — districts are experiencing difficulty staffing their schools with permanent qualified teachers, particularly in math, science, special education, and English language development. Districts are also having difficulty sustaining adequate pools of substitutes, which can limit districts' ability to release teachers from the school day to engage in professional learning.

## The Center View: Action Steps for Technical Assistance Providers

Despite challenges, California educators are making progress in implementing the CA Standards. Technical assistance providers can help districts address persistent barriers and bolster their progress by offering targeted professional learning and helping them identify effective instructional resources.

- **Build greater assessment literacy in schools and districts.** District resource developers and teachers need to be skilled at creating formative and interim assessments that are flexible, relevant, and informative to instruction. A development tool that matches the four components of the Smarter Balanced formative assessment process,<sup>3</sup> for example, would enable teachers to plan lessons more deliberately and begin to incorporate the formative assessment process more routinely.
- **Provide guidance about vetted standards-aligned resources and services.** Decisions about selecting standards-aligned instructional resources and service providers are made at the local level. Districts need guidance about identifying high-quality support that meets their local needs from the flood of available options.
- **Build capacity of site leadership to support standards implementation.** Increase site leaders' capabilities as instructional leaders of the standards. Deepen site leaders' knowledge of the standards and strengthen their familiarity with tools that can help them support teachers in improving standards-aligned instruction. Include relevant support for school leaders in professional learning designed for teachers.
- **Strengthen teacher capability to develop standards-aligned curriculum.** Provide teachers with templates, tools, and frameworks — such as those offered by the Literacy Design Collaborative and the Math Design Collaborative — to guide curriculum development. Help teachers develop skills to design differentiated, standards-based curriculum that supports all students in meeting the CA Standards.
- **Provide professional learning that enables teachers to better support the academic achievement of their English learner students.** Build teachers' knowledge base of language acquisition and academic literacy, and train teachers in research-based instructional practices to scaffold learning for English learners.

### For more on this study:

- Go to <https://thecenter.wested.org/>
- Contact Robert Sheffield, The Center's Director of California Initiatives, at [rsheffi@wested.org](mailto:rsheffi@wested.org)
- Read the [first](#) and [second](#) issues of this series found at <http://www.WestEd.org>

## Endnotes

- 1 Opfer, V. D., Kaufman, J. H., & Thompson, L. E. (2015). *Implementation of K–12 state standards for mathematics and English language arts and literacy: Findings from the American Teacher Panel*. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1500/RR1529/RAND\\_RR1529.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1529/RAND_RR1529.pdf)
- 2 Ruiz Soto, A. G., Hooker, S., & Batalova, J. (2015). *States and districts with the highest number and share of English language learners*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/states-and-districts-highest-number-and-share-english-language-learners>
- 3 Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. (2015). *The formative assessment process*. <https://www.smarterbalanced.org/>