

Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Summary of the Work of Seven Districts

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Introduction

To gauge the extent of district work in implementing the Common Core State Standards, staff from American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted informal interviews with staff representing seven school districts across the country. The districts were as follows:

- Baltimore City Public Schools—Baltimore, Maryland
- Decatur Public Schools—Decatur, Illinois
- Des Moines Public Schools—Des Moines, Illinois
- Memphis City Schools—Memphis, Tennessee
- Omega Academy Schools—Glendale and Phoenix, Arizona
- San Diego Unified School District—San Diego, California
- Tooele County School District—Tooele County, Utah

This report provides a summary of those interviews. It groups the gathered information into the following categories: curriculum and instruction, instructional leadership, professional development, assessments, and other areas.

Baltimore City Public Schools—Baltimore, Maryland

Curriculum and Instruction

Baltimore City Public Schools is beginning the Common Core State Standards implementation process by focusing on mathematical practices (problem solving, perseverance, precision); independent reading (text complexity) at prekindergarten to high school levels; informational reading and writing in Grades K–5; argument, informational reading, and writing in Grades 6–8; and English language arts (ELA) in Grades 9–12. The district will be working with leadership and teacher teams to create units of study. In the 2011–12 school year, the district will be focusing resources and support on the Common Core State Standards.

Instructional Leadership

The district has chosen to invest in building the capacity of school leaders and currently is working with school leadership teams (40–50 teacher leaders). The process involves a deep dive in eight sessions to help these teams understand what the Common Core State Standards say, how to read them, and how to implement them in terms of strategic planning. The district (including central office staff) is creating Common Core State Standards implementation plans using a tool developed with the Aspen Institute. The Aspen Institute has identified five “buckets” describing the areas that will help teacher leaders describe how they are thinking about this work. The district’s tool is based on these five areas. Teacher leaders will use this tool for planning, and the district will collect this work and analyze it for trends. The overall goal of the work is to create tangible tools that teacher leaders can take back and use with their teachers. The tools must be tangible so teachers will be able to see what the Common Core State Standards look like in their classrooms.

Professional Development

The district has realized the need to redefine professional development at the district level, which involves more training than typical professional development. The professional development will be revamped and will focus on going deeper with content. The first step in the process will be to understand gaps in teacher knowledge. The focus will be to connect what is already happening to the work of the Common Core State Standards, unpack it, and help teachers learn what the Common Core State Standards look like in terms of student learning (i.e., student samples). The district wants to help teachers create tangible opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills.

School administrators are expected to earmark money for professional development. Each administrator is expected to put aside money for teacher release and stipends for continuous training focusing on what is needed to change practice.

Other Areas

The district is working with the Aspen Institute to help with the Common Core State Standards implementation work. There is a network structure between schools that can assist with different areas of standards implementation. The theory of action is based on the idea that schools know best what they need.

Decatur Public Schools—Decatur, Illinois

Curriculum and Instruction

Decatur Public Schools is conducting a gap analysis using the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum. Teacher teams are writing curriculum maps.

Instructional Leadership

The district has created a two-year process for instructional leadership. During the first year, this leadership process will be piloted with representative teachers from every grade and most schools. During the second year, those teachers will be training other teachers in their buildings.

Professional Development

The district has a clear understanding of the changes that need to happen to move from current practice to practice focused on the Common Core State Standards. Because these standards assume that higher levels of rigor are expected of teachers, the district is aware of the additional need for professional development. The district is using Title I monies to begin this process and will seek out additional resources for professional development after the school board has approved the two-year plan.

Assessments

The district will be developing computer-based benchmark and formative assessments using ThinkLink Learning, which claims to have assessments that already are aligned to the Common Core State Standards. These new assessment will be formative in nature, technology based, and adaptive.

Des Moines Public Schools—Des Moines, Iowa

Curriculum and Instruction

Des Moines Public Schools analyzed its curriculum guides and common formative assessments and found that these products were being written at the rigor at which the students currently are performing, rather than the rigor of the Common Core State Standards. To remedy the situation, the district is developing sequences based on the Common Core State Standards—a common set of expectations for all students. Next, the district will collaboratively develop these sequences into unit guides. From these guides, building teams can create units of inquiry and then teachers can create engaging lessons.

The district is embedding the ELA and mathematics standards into the science and social studies curriculum. Backward design is being used to look at each unit of study, create some inquiry “big ideas” and essential questions, unpack the curriculum based on these questions, and then provide evidence in terms of the writing pieces to actually answer these questions.

Instructional Leadership

The district spent the entire year bringing in teacher teams. Lead teams were charged with unpacking the curriculum from the Common Core State Standards and creating curriculum units for reading and mathematics in Grades K–5 and then for English 1, 2, 3, and Algebra 1, 2, 3, and so on.

Professional Development

So far, 12 meetings have been held. Lead teachers from every grade level were brought in to look at these guides. The lead teachers went back and shared the information with teachers at their schools; then they came back to the next meetings and offered revisions to the guides. The district is aware that the guides are not yet perfect, but at least something is available for teachers to use in the interim. Next year, the district plans to focus on instruction, particularly through collaboration models, and maybe with a small group at the high school level.

Assessments

Unit assessments have been created for use with each pacing guide. The standards are bundled into units of study, and the unit assessments can be used in a pre/post test manner. Then the district is asking teachers to use their common formative assessments at the classroom level and providing support for them to do those assessments as progress-monitoring midpoint checks.

Other Areas

The district is aware that when implementing the standards in Grades K–12, gaps are inevitable. Students will be coming through the grade levels without having mastered all the skills, and then they will be exposed to even more rigorous requirements. So, for teachers, implementation is not just about intervention; it also is about anticipating which students might struggle. A helpful tool would be the creation of a gap analysis of foundational things that students missed as a result of a shift in the curriculum.

The focus for next year is technology integration and using technology to achieve the standards.

Memphis City Schools—Memphis, Tennessee

Curriculum and Instruction

The Tennessee Department of Education is encouraging Tennessee districts to implement the Common Core State Standards for Grades K–2 next year. This approach will be a complete revision of state standards. The Tennessee Department of Education has done the crosswalk using the Common Core Comparison Tool developed by Achieve and wants to drop in the standards grade-by-grade over the next few years until full implementation is complete in the 2014–15 school year. Memphis City Schools will follow this plan but also will move forward a little faster with help from the Aspen Institute.

The district is working with the Aspen Institute to create and facilitate curriculum writing teams. These teams will meet during the summer to build curriculum. The district has made the decision to go fully into the K–12 ELA writing standards. First, the district will drill where the gaps are and focus on pulling expectations downward. Next, the district will develop curriculum maps with a performance assessment component. In addition to focusing on ELA writing, the district plans to work with social studies and science to revise their curricula in the area of writing.

Instructional Leadership

During fall 2010, the leadership team went to the Aspen Institute meeting for training on the Common Core State Standards. The next step is for the leadership team to work with others in the district to unpack the standards and begin focusing on writing across the curriculum using the K–12 ELA standards. The district wants to focus on giving teachers the instructional tools they need to work with all students. Teachers also will be identifying exemplary practices and developing lessons in writing that get at the exemplary part of a common rubric.

Professional Development

This summer, the Tennessee Department of Education is conducting a one-day training for all teachers. This training will provide an overview of the standards with a focus on Grades K–2. Also this summer, Memphis City Schools is conducting a writing institute and every school will get trained in the ELA writing standards. These institutes will focus on formative assessments and how to bring the writing standards to life in classrooms. The district plans on using Beachscape for online professional development. There is a 57-hour requirement for all teachers in professional development.

Assessments

The district rolled out new “ramped up” technology-based performance writing assessments in the 2010–11 school year. These assessments were given in October and December 2010. The district is going to look at the data for teachers with the most gains, focus on these teachers, and ask them to present at the summer training. The teachers will use Media site presentations to share so that this information can be shared throughout the district.

The district will build off of these presentations and use the writing tool developed for Utah by Measurement Inc. After taking writing samples, the district will focus on developing a rubric that is connected to the Common Core State Standards. The next step is to begin looking at the K–2 ELA and mathematics standards.

Omega Academy Schools—Glendale and Phoenix, Arizona

Note: Omega Academy Schools are charter schools for K–12 students, with buildings at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels.

Curriculum and Instruction

Omega Academy Schools is using the Arizona Department of Education crosswalks to begin the work with the Common Core State Standards. The charter district knows that it will have to create more depth, especially with argument and open response.

Instructional Leadership

The charter district is using its School Improvement Grants (SIG) leadership team to train coaches to help high school teachers implement the Common Core State Standards. During Friday professional development, the coaches from the leadership team work with high school teachers and the director works with the K–8 staff. They differentiate not only by grade level but also by skill level. For professional development during the 2011–12 school year, the charter district has built in minimally two hours every Friday for collaboration on the Common Core State Standards.

Professional Development

Last year, the charter district started using SIG funds to send people to various out-of-state school improvement conferences. This situation started the conversation about the Common Core State Standards, led teachers to research anything they could find on the Internet about the Common Core, and stimulated more conversations within the charter schools.

This year, the Arizona Department of Education offered workshops from March through June for language arts. During the summer, mathematics workshops will be offered. The charter district is sending teachers, coaches, SIG team members, and two principals so that they can have the dialogue at the two-day workshops and then bring the information back to the schools.

Next fall, the coaches will conduct lesson planning work around the Common Core State Standards. They will teach, model, and work with the teachers on matching what they are doing now with the Arizona standards and then compare it with the different aspects of the Common Core State Standards.

Assessments

The Arizona Department of Education recommended that teachers build common formative assessments. The charter district is going to begin work in this area.

Other Areas

The charter district is committed to including the families of K–12 students. The Title I parent meetings will be focused on the Common Core State Standards.

San Diego Unified School District—San Diego, California

Curriculum and Instruction

The San Diego Unified School District has not yet completed the gap analysis for the Common Core State Standards. The district plans to involve teachers and administrators in the process. Currently, the district is currently looking at textbook adoptions (Grades K–5 *enVision*, a mathematics program that is aligned with the Common Core State Standards), focusing on the alignment of standards. The district also is looking at Web-based tools and technology to help deliver coherent and consistent messages.

Instructional Leadership

The district is collaborating with principals to bring teacher leaders to the table and involve them in the Common Core State Standards implementation. Also, the district is trying to visit the schools that are considered more “needy” (i.e., do not have strong teacher leaders, school administrators, or both). The California Department of Education will monitor these schools more closely for signs that intervention is needed. Local monitoring of implementation of the Common Core State Standards efforts will focus on schools identified as having the least capacity for implementation so that intervention can be offered.

Professional Development

Current district efforts are acknowledging that the Common Core State Standards are in existence. District administrators are attending countywide training meetings that provide updates on the Common Core. These administrators are becoming familiar with standards and the impact that the standards will have (e.g., increased rigor). The district most likely will bring in teacher leaders from each school to receive information and training; then the teacher leaders will go back to their schools and share what they have learned.

Assessments

The district is planning to assess student performance relative to the Common Core State Standards. Assessment is considered to be the biggest challenge for the district, and the current preoccupation is how to meet No Child Left Behind requirements during the transition. The district is going to wait to revise internal benchmarks before focusing on any of that work. In addition, the district is waiting for clear expectations from the California Department of Education. Once the district receives direction from the California Department of Education, it will begin work on reviewing and revising the benchmarks. In addition, the district currently is trying to develop a network of support throughout the county.

Other Areas

One difficulty is controlling the consistency of the messages relating to the Common Core State Standards. In a large district, it is critical to develop a plan for coherence in terms of what the schools are doing instructionally; the way they teach standards varies from level to level and sometimes site to site. The district emphasizes that once the Common Core State Standards are implemented, it will be essential to have coherence across the district, schools, and classrooms.

Tooele County School District—Tooele County, Utah

Curriculum and Instruction

The Tooele County School District has been using software to create mapping and pacing guides in ELA for Grades 7–12 and later will develop lessons using the backward design. This process is all electronic and on a template. Representatives from various grade levels have been working with a consultant to begin the work. These same representatives will attend a summer core academy and continue working in the fall. They are going to use ELA as a model for other subject areas. The district wanted to focus on getting one mapping and pacing guide developed first and creating a model process for other subject areas. The district realizes that because of the level of rigor that is involved with the implementing the Common Core State Standards at an earlier time for students, there will need to be a reshuffling of materials and also a reshuffling of the focus of each grade level. The district also is thinking a lot about the kind of interventions that will be needed for the anticipated kids who will struggle with meeting higher expectations. The decision was made to provide interventions at all grade levels.

Instructional Leadership

The Utah State Office of Education has set up a plan to train people on the Common Core State Standards this summer. The Tooele County School District has about 90 people from the district attending. These people will go for a week's training in mathematics and language arts. The district will then use this group to further identify as a district how they will implement the work within the district and set up a four-year plan for implementation.

Professional Development

The district has had several daylong meetings with teacher teams, which focused on unpacking the standards, mapping them, and looking at scope and sequence. Specific training days for the Common Core State Standards have been identified, and teachers will be paid to attend. The district believes that compensating teachers for these meetings is important because many of these teachers will become trainers of trainers.

The district has spent the last two to three years developing professional learning communities and considers such communities to be a good framework for conversations relating to the Common Core State Standards. This coming school year, for the first time, the district will have time on a weekly basis for the professional learning communities to meet. When school starts in the fall, teachers will have an opportunity to continue to working together and to build on their summer learning.

Other Areas

The district believes in communities of practice and wants to use this strategy to bring parents into the conversation regarding the Common Core State Standards. The district views parents as important partners who can offer valuable contributions to the implementation work.