Common Core Case Study
ALAIN LOCKE CHARTER SCHOOL
Chicago, Illinois
October 2014

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Contents
BACKGROUND
The National Charter School Resource Center, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, gathers, develops, and makes accessible a wide range of high-quality resources to support the charter school sector; enables the successful planning, authorization, implementation, and continuation of high-quality charter schools; and increases the national understanding of the charter school model.

COMMON CORE CASE STUDY SERIES
Implementation of the rigorous, research-based, and globally benchmarked Common Core State Standards will significantly impact curricula, instruction, assessment, and resources for charter schools.

Charter school leaders and staff need exemplars and resources that offer a wide array of examples targeted specifically toward the diverse student populations they serve. To meet this need, Safal Partners worked with American Institutes for Research to profile three examples of the successful implementation of the Common Core in charter schools across the United States: Alain Locke Charter School, Summit Preparatory Charter High School, and Achievement First Bushwick Middle School.
OVERVIEW OF ALAIN LOCKE CHARTER SCHOOL
The mission of Alain Locke Charter School (Alain Locke) is to serve as a demonstration site for urban schools exemplifying excellence in academics, the arts, personal and social development, and producing students who are globally competitive. Alain Locke, in Chicago, Illinois, serves approximately 550 students in Grades PK–8. The school was founded by Pat Ryan, Jr. and has been in operation for 14 years. In 2013, 94 percent of its students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch.

The goal of Alain Locke is to produce students who are globally competitive. Student achievement has been recognized nationally as among the best in the United States. Alain Locke uses a learner-centered approach that focuses on preparing students for a successful college experience. It provides an extended day, year-round program with four 10-week quarters separated by three weeklong intersessions and a short summer break.

This continuous cycle of learning allows in-depth exploration of each core subject and provides time for participation in a wide array of enrichment programs—including Spanish, technology, art, music, library, and physical education—that promote academic achievement and social growth. With the extended day, year-round program, Alain Locke students, compared with students at many traditional schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), have an additional 10 instructional days per year and 3.5 extra hours of instruction per day.

Alain Locke has been profiled by the U.S. Department of Education for making significant inroads towards closing the achievement gap in their school communities in the publication, *K-8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap*. The school was also 1 of 37 schools recognized as a “2013 Spotlight School” by the Illinois State Board of Education for the 8th consecutive year; this award recognized schools in low-income areas where academic performance is closing the achievement gap.

Four Drivers Leadership Model
Alain Locke’s academic success is anchored in the successful implementation of the Four Drivers Leadership model, a laser-like focus on key leadership principles and practices that create a high-achieving urban school:

- The development of a high-achieving adult team
- An aspirational and constructive learning environment
- Fusion of curriculum and instruction to professionally develop teachers
- Results-driven student achievement.
SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY FOCUS AREAS
This case study provides information on the following focus areas that have been identified as key areas for consideration in the shift to implementing the Common Core:

- **Strategic Planning for Common Core Implementation and Assessment.** This section examines the development, monitoring, and assessment of the school’s three-year transition to the Common Core.

- **Aligning the Curriculum and Instructional Practices to the Common Core.** This section focuses on the process for developing the scope and sequences in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics, professional development, and the partnership with the Achievement Network (ANet), which provides coaching and data analysis platforms.

- **Technology Capacity Building and Strategic Partnerships.** This section focuses on how Alain Locke scaled up its technology infrastructure by using strategic partnerships and e-rates.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED
The shift to the Common Core has provided Alain Locke with opportunities to leverage partnerships, increase ownership of three-year transition plan by instructional staff, and strengthen its academic program. Alain Locke staff used this opportunity to determine the best course to meet the increased demands of the Common Core and ultimately to improve student achievement. One key lesson learned during this transition is the importance of inclusion in decision making throughout the process by board members, school administration, teachers, and partners. The benefits of inclusion can be seen in the high teacher retention rates and the commitment of teachers to engage in the strategic planning process, monitoring, and implementation. Alain Locke staff learned another lesson through this process – the importance of aligning technology needs with new curricular materials and assessment platforms. Alain Locke believed that without building the technology infrastructure, they would not have been able to access the technology enhanced items utilized in the core-aligned MAP testing. The technology enhanced items will also be utilized in the upcoming Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, which will be administered in the 2014-2015 school year.
FOCUS AREA I: STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR TRANSITION TO THE COMMON CORE

In 2012, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) informed Alain Locke of the decision to strengthen the 2013 Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) in anticipation of meeting the Common Core in two ways:

- Cut scores were raised significantly to give a more realistic snapshot of a child’s academic progress.
- Twenty percent of the ISAT questions were redesigned to assess mastery of the Common Core.

According to the ISBE adjusted algorithm, Alain Locke’s “meets standard” score in the 2012–13 school year was 70.5%, an increase of 7.3 % from the 2011–12 school year. Alain Locke’s composite “meets” and “exceed” score in the 2012-13 school year was 86 percent. Per ISBE calculation, according to the new cut scores, Alain Locke’s “meets” would decrease to 63.2%. Even with the adjusted algorithm, the academic outcomes of the school remained strong and exceed the state average for public school academic performance.

To build on the success of the academic performance of its students and prepare for the transition to the Common Core, Alain Locke developed a three-year transitional plan. The plan included the process for aligning curricular materials, assessments, and instructional strategies to the Common Core and building the capacity of the teaching staff.

Setting priorities was a critical step in determining the best path for the transition to the Common Core. Starting in spring 2010, Alain Locke’s governing board began meeting to develop a strategic plan that would be functional, clear, inclusive, and transparent. The board members identified five keys to successful transition to the Common Core: ensuring strong leadership; securing financial resources; setting annual priorities; monitoring the plan regularly; and making adjustments as needed by reviewing data at least four times per year.

Under the leadership of Patrick Love, the principal of Alain Locke, a transition team was organized that included members of the teaching staff as well as the school’s two...
administrative staff (the principal and the director of students and operations). The team worked together to identify the major goals for each year of the transition, develop professional development goals and outcomes, and develop a calendar outlining the transition. The team also developed the agenda for the summer staff retreat. The team employed the following process for setting priorities and strategic planning:

- Focus on one or two areas throughout the year that can be executed well. It is easier to be mission driven concerning one or two areas versus many areas.
- Yearly priorities build on one another (scaffolding approach).
- Create a yearlong plan for execution (i.e., buy-in from the leadership team, buy-in from the full staff, and simple systems of support).
- Follow the data: Build in flexibility to address needs identified by the data, but come back to the original priorities and plan.

Figure 2 presents the strategic timeline that Alain Locke developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011–12</td>
<td>School leaders facilitated professional development sessions to develop the pace of transition to the Common Core in ELA and mathematics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012–13</td>
<td>Focus on ELA: refine the pacing plan (Schedule of Assessed Standards [SAS]) that is aligned with adopted interim assessments aligned to the ELA Common Core.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013–14</td>
<td>Focus on mathematics: refine the pacing plan for Mathematics Common Core assessments; finalize ELA pacing. The 2013 ISAT is 100 percent aligned with the Common Core.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The success of a strategic plan is based largely on how the plan is developed. By ensuring teacher voice during the planning process, Alain Locke addressed issues and challenges that teachers might face as they increase the rigor of curricular materials and instructional practices. Also, the meaningful involvement of teachers in the development of the transition plan was cited by Patrick Love, Alain Locke principal, as a contributing factor to high teacher retention levels.

The Alain Locke leadership team and Board of Directors use internal assessment results to monitor the academic program of their students by looking at absolute performance and growth. They also use the results of the state assessments. In addition to the assessments, the principal provides a written and oral report to the board at every meeting which addresses the status and progress of the school-wide priorities.
FOCUS AREA I: ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION TO THE COMMON CORE

In fall 2013, Alain Locke used a three-pronged approach to align its curriculum and instructional practices to the Common Core: leveraging partnerships, meaningful professional development, and the regular use of relevant and accessible data to inform instruction.

**Partnerships**

Alain Locke partnered with ANet in 2012 to administer standards-aligned interim assessments (four times per year) to consistently identify and close gaps in student learning. ANet is a nonprofit organization that helps schools strengthen their practices and culture related to using standards and data to accelerate student learning in underserved communities. One aspect of the partnership included participating in a cohort of 12 school leaders in Chicago. This cohort meeting provided school leaders with opportunities to collaborate and collectively address issues and challenges related to transition to the Common Core. Cohort participants also were charged with developing a scope and sequence that could be used or adjusted based on the needs of individual schools. At Alain Locke, ANet staff provided support and resources as the school determined its transition plan internally.

Each grade-level team received an ANet developed Schedule of Assessed Standards (SAS) based on the Common Core that let them know which standards and objectives would be assessed on each of the four annual interim assessment. One of the school’s first tasks was the development of the scope and sequence in ELA in the 2012-2013 school year and mathematics in the 2013-2013 school year. Using the SAS as a guide, Alain Locke staff developed a scope and sequence at each grade level internally which outlined when each standard would be taught to students. The SAS provided guidance on what each of the four annual tests would cover. Working together, ANet and Alain Locke staff developed the school’s SAS.

In addition to providing Alain Locke with internal assessments in reading and math, an ANet coach also was assigned to the school. The coach meets with Alain Locke leadership to
facilitated quarterly data meetings. These meetings are in addition to the data meetings the school facilitates regularly throughout the school year. The partnership also provides school staff with access to ANet’s online portal. ANet’s data reports and instructional resources are available on its online platform. Assessment data are available 48 hours after administration. ANet also connects educators with instructional resources.

**Professional Development**

Alain Locke provides a wide range of professional development opportunities that are specifically targeted toward increasing the effectiveness of program delivery. Alain Locke leveraged its existing professional development opportunities to support teachers in their transition to the Common Core. Professional development opportunities included the following:

- There is an annual whole-staff, three-day retreat at the beginning of each school year. It is during this time that Alain Locke staff discuss the year’s school-wide priorities and present the plans for execution.
- Weekly in-house whole-staff professional development, which occurs on Fridays from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., has been used primarily for Common Core–related trainings. Instructors, instructional assistants, and administrators serve as participants or facilitators of the sessions. Monthly professional development schedules (including agendas) are provided to staff on the first day of every month. Detailed agendas are provided one week prior to implementation.
- Off-site professional development conferences and workshops are used as needed.
- Encouragement to pursue continuing education opportunities through other organizations and universities for National Board Certification, master’s degree programs, and other relevant certification programs.

Alain Locke provides support to teachers through more strategic use of collaborative planning time. During the planning time, each grade-level team designed long-term plans (using the quarterly planning templates) aligned to SAS and the scope and sequence (e.g., identify the standards that will be taught and assessed and plot out major units). Teachers also worked together to create quarterly plans (e.g., identify instructional plan and design formative and summative assessments) and weekly plans based on the grade-level yearlong plan and quarterly syllabus.

Alain Locke’s administration provided formal and informal opportunities for educators to strengthen their use of differentiated instruction (e.g., one-on-one instruction, small groups, and identified targeted intervention programs). These opportunities supported educators and instructional assistants in meeting the individual needs of students regardless of their academic achievement levels.
One outcome of the transition team was the development of a professional development annual calendar that uses the annual priorities to focus the trainings and build teacher capacity to meet the needs of students.

Figure 3 presents a summary of the professional development focus areas at Alain Locke.

**Figure 3. Common Core Professional Development Focus Areas at Alain Locke**

**2011–12: Taking It to the Next Level**
- Educators worked collaboratively to develop a gap analysis between the Common Core and their curricular materials and instructional practices. This information was then used to inform the development of the Common Core implementation plan.
- Educators revised their existing individualized professional development plans (system of support plan) to identify instructional strengths and growth opportunities that support transition to the Common Core.
- Educators participated in professional development opportunities that focused on how to use ongoing assessments to proactively inform instruction by leveraging the partnership with ANet and determine benchmark assessments. To implement this professional development component, Alain Locke also leveraged its partnership with SWC Technology Partners (SWC) to upgrade its technology infrastructure to support the increased use of online assessments.
- In addition to these two focus areas, Alain Locke also redefined the roles of instructional assistants to increase their responsibilities for student learning and provided additional professional development opportunities to instructional assistants that offered instructional strategies to support students who are struggling.

**2012–2013: Digging Deeper**
Educators received training in the following areas:
- The adoption of the ELA Common Core-aligned interim assessments via ANet.
- The use of the Reader’s Workshop for the primary literacy block (whole- to small-group focus, leveled reading library).
- Phase one of response to intervention (RTI): progress monitoring & support with uniformity of assessments (BAS).

**2013–2014: Working the Core**
Educators received trainings in the following areas:
- The adoption of the mathematics Common Core and the mathematics Common Core–aligned transition plan.
- Phase two of RTI: Developing effective RTI plans and interventions support (RTI toolkit binder) & Implementation of Behavioral RTI Plans BAS.
2014–15: Taking It to the Next Level

Alain Locke has identified the following focus areas:

- Incorporating instructional strategies in the classroom that are directly linked to ELA standards as well as identifying what student mastery looks like for each standard; supporting teachers in understanding of text complexity considerations and choosing appropriately complex texts for their classrooms.
- Understanding the demands of the Common Core Writing Standards by internalizing a protocol for analyzing student writing for actionable trends.
- Implementing the Writer’s Workshop framework at all grade levels in order to have a common language/approach to writing instruction.
- Designing and executing individualized interventions as well as implementing behavioral RtI plans.
- Understanding the instructional and technological implications of the PARCC released items including what students need to know and do to demonstrate mastery; identifying student and instructor supports that will lead to greater PARCC-readiness.

Use of Relevant and Accessible Data to Monitor Transition Plan

Alain Locke administrators facilitate biannual meetings that serve as opportunities to assess the implementation of the transition plan and apply course corrections if needed. In the 2013 data team meeting, it was determined that the pace of the rollout for mathematics was too aggressive based on the results of the internal assessment, even though it provided the same amount of time as the ELA rollout plan. The team decided to adjust the mathematics timeline and create more opportunities for teachers to address challenges. In spring 2014, the administration team identified the need to develop and implement additional strategies to engage students and parents in the transition. Strategies included creating parent-friendly informational flyers, data reports, and mini lessons that families could use with their children to support learning beyond the classroom.

By employing a three-pronged approach to align curriculum and instructional practices to the Common Core, Alain Locke leveraged existing partnerships, enhanced its suite of professional development opportunities for teachers and instructional assistants, and ensured the regular use of relevant and accessible data to inform instruction.
FOCUS AREA III: TECHNOLOGY CAPACITY BUILDING AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

After ISBE provided the PARCC technology survey to assess a school’s capacity to implement the Common Core assessments, all Illinois public schools were informed of the need to build their technology infrastructures to accommodate these assessments. Alain Locke saw a steady increase in the use of technology by teachers and students for instruction and assessment. This use would only increase with the transition to implementing the Common Core assessment in 2015.

In October 2011, Alain Locke began a relationship with SWC Technology Partners (SWC) after inviting employees of the company to tour the school. The relationship has grown over the years to include donated time and resources as well as opportunities for SWC staff to volunteer with students in the Robotics Club. SWC is a provider of IT solutions to midsize businesses. “The first time I saw Alain Locke’s computer lab, I realized that we were in a position to make a difference in the learning experience while also saving the school $20,000 or $30,000 in replacing those 30 computers alone. From there, the project grew to include the school’s entire technology ecosystem and eventually the robotics club,” Knott said. For more than 30 years, SWC has delivered technology solutions that are designed to optimize productivity, strengthen customer relationships, enhance data sharing and drive profitability. SWC specializes in the technology solutions that match the business needs of midmarket organizations.

SWC donated resources and time to the server room which included upgrading hardware, increasing network capacity, and adding data protection features. SWC also modernized the 30-seat computer lab in the school library; and deployed Microsoft virtualization technology to create a more flexible and cost-effective computing environment. The visualization technology makes it possible to customize desktops for each grade for faster and easier student use, to simplify computer maintenance, and to reduce future hardware replacement costs.

The remaining 150 classroom and staff personal computers will be updated in the next phase, with SWC donating tens of thousands of dollars in hardware, software, and services. The new infrastructure is replacing dated computers with old application suites and slow webpage loading times, adding critical backup and fail-safe capabilities lacking in the previous installation, and overcoming other deficiencies that hampered student work as well as increased the risk of data loss.

In addition to in-kind donations of staff time and services, SWC introduced Alain Locke to staff at Microsoft. Alain Locke established a relationship with Microsoft that allowed for free software upgrades. Figure 4 presents the technology upgrade timeline at Alain Locke.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Participated in the PARCC launch event and joined the electronic mailing list to receive tips and announcements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Completed the PARCC Technology Survey, identified areas that needed upgrading to support the increased demand for the use of technology in instructional practice and assessment. Established relationship with SWC. SWC staff connected Alain Locke staff to Microsoft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Alain Locke began to upgrade its network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Increased wireless access point throughout school to ensure adequate broadband capacity. Invested in a classroom response system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Upgraded the Internet connection to 50 megabytes and increased wireless access points throughout the school building. Invested in classroom response systems to pilot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The transition to the Common Core provided Alain Locke with an opportunity to strengthen its technology infrastructure to meet the increased use of technology for accessing curricular materials and assessments. In addition to building the technology infrastructure, Alain Locke leveraged partnerships to increase community engagement. By providing its technology partners with opportunities for their staff to volunteer in meaningful ways, Alain Locke increases the sustainability of the relationship.

**CONCLUSION**

The shift to the Common Core State Standards has had wide ranging impacts on the entire school community. By creating a targeted strategic plan through an inclusive process, Alain Locke was able to increase stakeholder buy in and accountability. In the alignment of curricular and instructional practices to the Common Core standards, Alain Locke continued the use of an inclusive strategy that empowered all staff to contribute to the revisions while leveraging existing partnerships to meet the increased rigor and demand of the standards. To support these curricular and instructional shifts, Alain Locke also strengthened their technology infrastructure that allows administrators, teachers and students to access materials and resources as well as to work collaboratively.
The shift has provided Alain Locke with opportunities to leverage partnerships, increase ownership of the plan by instructional staff, and strengthen its academic program. The transition to the Common Core standards will support Alain Locke in meeting its mission to serve as a demonstration site for urban schools exemplifying excellence in academics, the arts, personal and social development, and producing students who are globally competitive.
RESOURCES

Focus Area I: Strategic Planning

Focus Area II: Aligning the Curriculum and Instructional Practices to the Common Core

Interviewees
The following individuals were interviewed as part of this case study:

- Claire Hartfield, board chair, Alain Locke Charter School
- Patrick R. Love, principal, Alain Locke Charter School
- Derek Thompson, teacher and Leadership team member, Alain Locke Charter School
- Jennifer Mitch, special education teacher, Leadership team member and Response to Intervention coordinator, Alain Locke Charter School
- Lloyd Warber, technology manager, Alain Locke Charter School
- Barbara Thompson, coach, Achievement Network